In Support of Sustainability: Teaching Future Circus Artists in Québec

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative-interpretative research presents the experiences and observations of thirteen circus artists around the concept of professional sustainability, as they have come to understand it in their careers. All thirteen had worked with me as their teacher in circus discipline classes during their post-secondary education at the *École nationale de cirque* (ENC). They graduated from the school's three-year professionalizing program between the years of 2011 and 2021. In semi-directed interviews, they spoke of their personal understandings of sustainability following years of professional experiences. They related their experiences of autonomy support within the learning environment we shared in classes. The observations and memories of these circus artists, taken in dialogue with my reflexive analysis of own teaching behaviors, demonstrate an alignment between balanced career longevity and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The professionalizing education of circus artists today as performers, creators and athletes demands preparation not only for immediate employment, but also for long-term health and artistic growth. Circus artists creatively adapt to employment instability, variable working demands-conditions, injury and repetition. Autonomy-supportive physical and creative learning environments within a high-performance professionalizing circus education can facilitate the development of intrinsic motivation, which will allow them to persist in a career in circus arts.

Keywords: *Circus education, autonomy support, career sustainability, Québec circus, performing arts pedagogy*

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Hello, and Welcome to My Thesis.

If you've found your way here, I'm guessing you're a circus researcher, an academic of some kind. Thank you for all that you do. I hope you will find something useful in this that you can connect to whatever interests you and push our whole pedagogical-circus knowledge rock further up the hill.

I think I should be up front and say that I didn't write this for you.

Mostly, I wrote this for other circus teachers.

Here's a window into what I discovered about myself and my practice, when I went on a quest.

Most of us come to teaching from having been performing artists or athletes or coaches in some other field or from circus. The transversality of our skills and knowledge is a gift: when we can adapt what we know, we help to shift the existing landscape. Most of us don't learn about ideas surrounding circus or teaching methods or curriculum before we begin our teaching work.

Most of us work in places that validate our efforts when the people with whom we work can be seen to learn physical skills, then go on to execute them well and safely. That's a beautiful and meaningful thing. By mentioning it, I am not diminishing its value. It is essential.

I wrote this for us, because we know that teaching in sport or in art can be more than efficiently communicating scaffolded physical learning experiences on a path towards mastery. There are so many ways to do it. We have so much freedom to be ourselves in the doing of it, all in support of the learning of the students with whom we work. We get to learn and to learn about ourselves as we go along.

I discovered that what makes sense to me is to try to work in a way that supports long-term professional development within a high-performance culture. I checked in with the folks that this might have affected over the years, former students, who told me what they thought, and then gave me some better insights (as most often happens when we listen to students). I'm really grateful to them, and to all of my fellow teachers who have supported my development in this craft of teaching over the last 20 years. Thank You All. You have profoundly changed my life for the better.

Thank you to Dr. Louis Patrick Leroux and Dr. Marie-Eve Skelling Desmeules, my thesis co-supervisors, for their tenacity, their wisdom, their active support and their enthusiastic curiosity. Thank you to Prof. Angélique Willkie for her grounded artistry and the generosity of her thoughts. Thank you to Darlene Dubiel in the INDI Department of Concordia for her unwavering clarity, and to Anna Karyna Barlati for her brilliance as a librarian.

Most importantly, I thank my parents, Carol and Frank, who taught me to examine the life I'm living; to listen to the forest, to the music and to my heart; to have faith, to be still, and to quietly know.

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Chapter I: Introduction

There's only two types of people in the world:
the ones that entertain, and the ones that observe…

Britney Spears, Circus

It's difficult to talk about circus.

For many, circus is an activity that one must *do* in order to understand its complexity.

It's also hard to talk about *teaching* circus. The very act of teaching circus has its own specificities and subtleties.

Yet contrary to the Britney Spears' assertion, the do-ers of circus can also be its observers. In this thesis, those who perform circus (and one who teaches it) reflect on their own experiences to understand what circus artists need to sustain a balanced career, and how teaching practices intended to support autonomy functioned within a vocational program designed to facilitate immediate employment.

This qualitative-interpretive research seeks to offer professional and pedagogical perspectives on teaching and learning circus in higher education. It explores the meaning of career sustainability as understood by professional circus artists, and by their former teacher. Thirteen graduates of the *École nationale de cirque* (ENC) participated in semi-structured interviews with me, a researcher who had been their circus discipline teacher during their three-year vocational education. The artists' reflections on their professional work since graduation permitted me to better comprehend their experiences of sustainability. Their memories from our classes together informed my understanding of their lived experiences of autonomy-support

within my evolving teaching practice. When circus artists can identify what is fun, meaningful or useful in their work; when they can maintain important human connections, know their strengths, and express their limits, they will continue to evolve within this ever-changing profession. Circus teachers can develop tools to support long-term, holistic development of future circus artists within performance-driven, vocational programs.

In this chapter, I introduce circus in 2025 as a current performing art in evolution, the profession of circus artist today, and the kinds of circus work available. I present the vocational nature of higher education programs in North America which prepare future circus artists for work, the general role and responsibilities of a circus discipline teacher, and some specificities of the pedagogical culture of which I was a member at the *École nationale de cirque* in Montréal from 2007-2022. I articulate my position as an insider-outsider member of this culture and thus an insider-outsider researcher. I identify the support of professional sustainability as integral to my personal hidden curriculum within the context of my teaching in circus higher education. I articulate the resulting research questions about sustainability and autonomy support investigated in this study, and why I believe this research matters.

A Note on This Research

I came to this research as a circus teacher who wanted to understand more clearly what I do in the distinct context within which I live and work. In the slow process of reading, researching and writing, I have had the opportunity to articulate some of my experiential understandings gleaned as a person who has worked within the circus field in Canada, Québec, the United States and Europe as a performer, teacher, and educational program director since 2003. I have often had the experience of articulating a thought about history, culture, pedagogy, or socio-economy of circus, only to discover that someone else had already researched and

written about it, or many people had. Their insights helped me to deepen my insider understandings and observations as a practitioner within the particular and ever-changing professional and pedagogical culture of circus in Montréal.

Understanding Work in Circus Today

Most people in North America associate "circus" with the clown antics and 3-ring spectacle of the travelling Ringling Brothers shows of the 20th century, or the lycra fashions, inventive makeup and gymnastic feats of Cirque du Soleil. Circus for most of us still signifies popcorn, lions, fire and incomprehensible acrobatics – a far cry from the post-modern corporal research, concept-driven narrative, or aesthetic expression *in situ* that are also all representations of circus today.

The Canada Council for the Arts recognized circus as an *art form* meriting national funding in 2009 (En Piste, n.d.), eight years after circus' same recognition by the *Conseil des arts et lettres de Québec*, twenty-five years after the birth of Cirque du Soleil and 241 years after the performance of Phillip Astley's first equestrian spectacular (Leroux, 2016a, 2022). The evolution of circus expression around the world inhabits a very particular space that both *lies between and includes* sport and art, entertainment and evocation, postmodernism and pop culture. Today, circus development continues as specifically shaped by local and international culture, language, performance spaces, audience expectations, artistic curiosity, financial feasibility, and performer audacity.

Industry insiders or general audience members alike -- we tell ourselves that we know circus when we see it. We often attempt to frame its particularities in order to understand its distinctive nature, for it is something quite different from other performing art forms. Since the late twentieth and early 21st century, historians and cultural mediators have tried to distill its

essence, or to delineate its codes. Many feel that circus as a performing art requires the presence of risk-taking or the perception of risk, the expression of physical virtuosity in performance, the use of objects and disciplines particular to circus genres, or presentation in a circular space (Jacob, 2016).

Today, in 2025, all of those once-defining qualifiers have been contested by contemporary circus creators and performers – and yet, the work remains circus. It seems no longer necessary to argue about membership in the genre of circus in our global cultural context. There's space for all of its interpretations to co-exist. There are willing and eager audiences for all kinds of expressions of circus as a performance. Often as we try to describe the complexity of our individual appreciation and understanding of circus through words, a shared language evades us. In our ongoing activity as researchers, performing artists, creators, teachers and audience members, we continue to "practice the paradox of theorizing the unique" (van Manen, 1997, p. xii), by articulating our particular experiences of this ever-changing, widely-varied art form, and discovering commonalities. Identifying patterns of lived experiences through writing and conversation provides a means of recognizing the evolution of contemporary circus' inclusively diverse expressions.

Magali Sizorn's (2019) socio-anthropological research in physicality, art and sport describes the transformation of circus into an art form, its "artification" which today necessitates that circus "artists" work within a complex circus holding a mixity of values and expressions.

> Two types of circus coexist: one that is craft, with hereditary transmission and insertion in a tradition, and another that is an art, valuing the creative individual, paragon of advanced modernity. Despite these differences, bodily cultures and performance practices, as well as the institutional functioning and necessities of the marketplace,

> sustain circus protagonists within composite forms of spectacles and regimes that are theoretically incompatible, since they refer at once to craft, profession and vocation. (p. 368)

The existing "composite forms" of work within the circus milieu today, whether viewed as craft or art, continue to diversify. Circus artists today might work in professional settings such as musical theatre, contemporary dance, film stunt work, 3D digital imaging-motion capture, music-centered arena tours, circus cabarets, cruise ships, commercials, competitive festivals, theme parks, corporate made-to-measure shows, circus repertory companies, plays, social equity or humanitarian projects, site-specific installations, magic shows, small-scale collectives, street performances, research projects, self-produced showcases or long-running touring tent shows. They probably will work in many of these contexts, locally and internationally, during their careers. In their writing on Integrated Training as a behavioral and cognitive pedagogy for preparing contemporary circus artists, education researchers Jon Burtt and Katie Lavers (2017) support that circus artists today will be required repeatedly to adapt the offer of their skills to changing professional demands and conditions local to each project, to each opportunity. Within circus artists' identity as performers, "*interprètes*," they are also often required to be creative developers of content, whether they create their own shows, collectively devise choreographies, or fit their work into the concepts and logistical frameworks determined by others. This vast expansion in the possibilities of circus performance has happened rapidly – over the last thirty years (Lavers, Leroux & Burtt, 2020). Unlike traditional family-based disciplinary training, a current known and accepted path to joining this varied profession can be found through completion of established professionalizing higher education programs in circus arts.

As supported by the research of Herman (2009) and Jacob (2008) for the International Network of Professional Circus Education (FEDEC), professionalizing circus programs have continued to evolve internationally in the current higher educational landscape in order to support the development of circus artists who will navigate an increasingly complex and rich milieu. These programs justify their pertinence by their ability to shape successful future circus performers and creators. Each program adapts its focus and identity around the professional competencies it prioritizes. In North America, the public and private funding of circus higher education programs, as well as their ability to recruit students, depend upon their capacity to educate graduates who are demonstrably employable upon program completion. The content of the curriculum of most higher education programs is geared towards promoting an understanding of the particular possibilities currently offered by the local professional milieu, and a capacity for self-promotion as a circus artist in order to find work, as noted in the economic and geographic research of Rantisi & Leslie (2015) who examined the functioning of the *École nationale de cirque* as an economic intermediary to the sector, and the doctoral thesis of curriculum researcher Funk (2024) which examined the lived educational and professional experiences of graduates of DOCH in Stockholm. In this way, the professional milieu influences the offer and structure of professionalizing programs by its expressed cultural labor needs, while the different professionalizing programs influence the milieu through the aptitudes of their graduates (Jacob, 2008).

Circus Pedagogical Culture: Identifying as an Insider-Outsider in Québec

I came to this research as a circus educational insider, curious about my own teaching practice within professionalizing circus arts education in North America. In my role as an aerial discipline teacher in the DEC-DEE programs at the *École nationale de cirque* (ENC) from 2007-

2022, I felt innately that the micro of how I worked with students as individuals every day was integral to the macro institutional goal of preparing future circus artists for such a vast diversity of possible work. If any recognized, accrediting circus art school program can meet the complex challenge of training an art form simultaneously perceived as "a craft, a profession, and a vocation" (Sizorn, 2019, p. 368), I believe its teachers are key to its success. How do they, how do we (for I continue to teach circus) do what we do? And how do we define what it is that we do?

Circus disciplinary teachers are not only transmitters of technical knowledge within an articulated curriculum. Educational sociologist Florence Legendre (2014) notes that circus teachers socialize students into ways of being, ways of perceiving, ways of acting as a part of a professional culture. They "transmit contemporary practices and conventions" (Rantisi & Leslie, 2015, p. 407), applying specific knowledge gained from local professional experiences to their teaching. In her research with the educational communities of the ENC in Montréal and *Centre national des arts du cirque* (CNAC) in Chalôns, Dr. Marie-Eve Skelling Desmeules (2022) notes that circus teachers connect students directly to the local culture of circus, as they are often continuing actors within its professional contexts outside of school institutions. Through their bespoke, individualized work with students, circus teachers facilitate artistic and physical growth, all the while indoctrinating students both into shared interpretations of creative expression as well as professional norms and behaviors, even as that professional culture is changing (Rantisi & Leslie, 2015, Legendre, 2014).

Higher education circus teachers have their own ideas and biases about what they do and how they do it (Legendre, 2014). They define their personal educational objectives in relation to the professional milieu, to the program curriculum they deliver, to the institutional culture they

inhabit, and to the needs of the students they teach. Working within "a culture of training through mentorship" (Bezille, 2018, p. 189, my translation), circus teachers are responsible for highly personalized, day-to-day delivered course content, adaptations, structure, risk-management and evaluation processes in direct contact with learners, all while responding to internalized and external expectations from students, administrators and themselves. They function within the curriculum of an established program, within a "pedagogical culture" (Vienneau, 2017, p. 45) created by dominant shared beliefs about teaching and learning as well as their collective knowledge and practices. Each professionalizing circus school will have its own evolving culture of teaching and learning, shaped by its history, its values, its curriculum and its ever-changing members (Jacob, 2008).

The wealth and depth of distinct teaching cultures in circus comes from the variety of knowledge and know-how within its faculties (Skelling Desmeules, 2022; Boutet-Lanouette et al., 2017; Jacob, 2008). At the ENC, many of the circus discipline teachers have immigrated to Canada. They teach in French, but speak different languages (Spanish, Russian, Ukrainian, Slovakian, French, English, Polish, German and Swedish to name a few). Many have been elite sports athletes and-or coaches. A few were a part of the beginnings of circus in Québec in the 1980s. Some were (or still are) circus performers with companies in Québec and-or internationally. Some work as discipline coaches, acrobatic choreographers, or show directors, with local circus companies when they are not teaching. Some are graduates of the ENC's three- year professionalizing program for circus artists; many (like me) are graduates of the ENC's one-year *Formation de formateur* coach training program.

I officially arrived in Québec in 2003 as an immigrant from New York, an English-speaking contemporary dancer who found her way four years later into an aerial disciplinary

circus teaching practice in French at the *École nationale de cirque*. My work as an aerial teacher there followed a conservatory high-performance education in dance technique and academics in the United States and England, a career as a contemporary dancer in New York, brief professional experiences as an aerialist in Canada and abroad, and eventually a one-year professionalizing certification in circus teaching at the ENC. As a dancer, I had grown up in and absorbed the values and biases of a corporeal art form very different from circus. Dance served as my polestar; my familiar landscape. While both dance and circus as performing arts are physical and ephemeral, their codes, as I experienced them, differ immensely. The determining presence of virtuosic physical performance at the heart of Québec circus, and its inherent celebration of the individual (as articulated by French sociologist Sylvain Fagot in 2006) contrasted with my experience of relational expression and collective synchronicity in dance. In my long-term work as circus discipline teacher at the ENC, I remained both a cultural insider and an outsider; an *immigrante* to Canada and to circus.

As such, I began my work at the ENC during the movement towards "homogenization" in teaching cultures at professionalizing circus schools noted by Legendre (2014, p. 80) in the mid-2000s, a moment when circus discipline teachers were recruited in higher education programs for their experience in circus creative practices and performances, as well as skills analysis. More than a decade of contact with differences in teaching approaches, methods, and values through rich, collaborative relationships with my ENC colleagues brought me to examine and to question how my work as a circus teacher facilitated long-term development of circus artists within a vocational performing arts program; a program designed to assure rapid entry into the profession.

On Language and Opposition

A word on language: the naming of things is a difficult matter, as T.S. Eliot noted, in particular when you function in a country with two official languages. I'm choosing to call my role at ENC as that of a teacher – a disciplinary circus teacher. I taught mostly aerial disciplines (rope, trapeze, dance trapeze, duo trapeze, *tissu*) as major and minor discipline subjects to adult students in the 3-year degree granting vocational programs.

As faculty at the ENC, we often referred to ourselves as coaches (*coaches*, *formateurs*, *entraineurs* – trainers), and students often called us coaches. The word coach has sport connotations. Coaches don't write course syllabi, give mid-term and final grades, or write official comments. Coach signifies a very particular, objective-driven, short-term role in relationship to someone else who is required to deliver a performance or a result. Teacher feels more fitting to me as a word to refer to my role at the ENC, given the variety of tasks necessary in functioning in an official CEGEP environment, and my vision of the work of teaching. Teacher connotes certain responsibility within an educational process, in contrast to the realization of a particular outcome. To me, teachers "are facilitators of learning rather than givers of information" (Rogers, 1994, p. 8).

In the ENC context, it is interesting to note the differentiation between those teachers who were considered circus "technique teachers" (i.e. circus disciplines), and those who were "artistic counselors" (coming often from dance or theatre or circus careers, who would work with students in their act development as advisors on creative process, choreography, and performance qualities). This separation between "technique" and "artistic" is a division expressed colloquially by students and faculty, and officially in curriculum structures, connoting values which are respectively athletic performance-based and considered objective versus

emotive and subjective (Sizorn, 2022). This commonly articulated division between "technique" and "artistry" suggests antagonism instead of collaboration between qualities.

In this vein, much research on circus history, curriculum, or transmission mentions art and sport in a binary opposition or antithetical relationship within circus. In 2017, a program director at ENC stated "…there are two profiles of students who enter the program: artists who want to hone their artistic skills, and athletes who are more interested in physical performance" (Boutet et al., 2017, p. 137). This confrontational polarity is similarly projected onto concepts of tradition and contemporaneity, expression and entertainment, or art and craft.

I mention this here as a reminder to myself and to others that understanding anything is complex and it is tempting to put notions in oppositional boxes. Fortunately, circus does not work that way. Circus occupies an inclusive space of liminality in its mythic "otherness," a space which is full of "yes and" rather than "either or" (Fricker & Malouin, 2018). In contemporary circus, art and sport are not antithetical; but evolve together. Circus performers can be motivated creatively by artistry and athleticism. Circus teachers can both facilitate learning and direct actions. Movement can be performative and poetic. Contemporary circus can utilize traditional circus dramaturgies. As a researcher, I can have a position as both an insider and an outsider within a pedagogical culture. Difference does not indicate opposition, conflict or antithesis as a matter of course. Difference, though complex, is often sought after and embraced in circus. We can indeed both entertain and observe.

Sustainability as Hidden Curriculum

I believe that as educators, our storied individual histories, values and interests shape a personal "hidden curriculum" (Vienneau, 2017, p. 44) which each of us carries and transmits through how we teach. Educational philosophers Orón Semper & Blasco (2018) define that

teachers' hidden curriculum may include particular learning they hope students will develop through work in class. This learning is not written in a class syllabus, or overtly explained, but results from the interpersonal relationship between teacher and student. Teachers might not be aware of the curriculum they carry, and it may evolve as they grow through their teaching careers. For me, it became important to identify and articulate my own hidden curriculum, in order to see the space between myself and the pedagogical culture I both inhabited and carried with me in my role as a teacher (Starr, 2010).

I identified the concept of sustainability as a part of that hidden curriculum, stemming from my intention to support autonomy in circus artists, almost twenty years after beginning to teach circus to adults in varying contexts. At the beginning of my teaching career at the ENC, my experiences as a dancer moving into my own professional career brought me to identify autonomy as a value and a skill I thought essential, something I wanted to help circus students develop during our work together. Self Determination Theory, a macro-theory of human motivation developed by psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (Ryan & Deci, 2000), offered me a framework for understanding approaches and methods I believed I used in my teaching to support holistic development of autonomy and creative adaptability, reflecting the "applied creative thinking" theorized by educational psychologists Gube & Lajoie (2020) and by circus education researcher Funk (2024) as "applied circus creativity." The desire to support a healthy long-term career informed how I transmitted the given curriculum of the professionalizing program of the ENC through my teaching. Future circus artists needed to be able to identify and to balance the multiple demands of the working environment and themselves with the resources available to them. The very nature of these working environments would

require their freedom to analyze, act and adapt creatively in order to assure their well-being through ever-changing circumstances.

Research Questions

My research seeks to understand and articulate the lived experiences of professional circus artists relating to sustainability in their careers by asking:

- What do graduates of a higher education circus program identify as necessary to support career sustainability following years of professional experience?
    - How do their ideas intersect with my understanding of professional sustainability and what might support it?
- How do they remember the learning environment we shared in disciplinary circus classes as it relates to the support of autonomy?

Why Study Sustainability?

I began this research with the hopes of deepening my understanding of the relational learning process between teachers and students in circus education. I wanted to see my teaching practice and to improve it by understanding graduates' experiences.

There lies an inherent conceptual tension within any professionalizing arts program which is governed by the production and validation of short-term measured physical and creative results (assessments, evaluations, comprehensive exams), and, as theorized by Skelling Desmeules (2022), must also offer an accumulation of professionalizing educational experiences that exist beyond evaluative structures in order to support future employability. Development as an artist (circus, musician, actor, dancer, visual artist) implies a long-term engagement with the field of practice. Stakeholders in higher education measure success through graduates' efficient,

rapid transition to professional work. Durable artistic practice necessitates the development of personal tools, and an understanding of generative creative process stemming from educational experiences. Educational structures focus on measuring achievable results. A study of what might support career sustainability within the field of circus may identify additional competencies that higher education programs could develop. I hope this research will offer teachers within any higher education program perspectives that might be useful to the development of their own approaches supporting students as they navigate the tension between product and process.

The focus on rapid employability post-graduation may be particular to the Québec circus higher education context. Many circus students assume that having assured performance work prior to graduation is the norm, based on oft-cited statistics of a 95% professional placement rate upon graduation (*École nationale de cirque*, 2023), or "success stories" from previous graduates. In the current North American post-COVID arts world, established companies, venues and festivals are still recovering audiences, searching for the economic and resource stability required to create new productions and opportunities for employment. It may take longer for circus graduates to find consistent work, or to accumulate professionalizing experiences that will lead to paid work. Additionally, recent changes to Canadian immigration policy (Wong, 2024) indicate that international graduates of higher education circus schools in Québec will not be eligible for a post-graduation work permit, meaning that they will not be able to work in the local milieu for which they were prepared by their program. An understanding of tools to develop in support of persistence of circus practice may become a necessary part of curricula. Conscious teaching towards individual program objectives and in support of career longevity may provide

programs with a path towards optimization, and teachers with an opportunity to renew their approaches.

This research may be useful in its articulation of self-determination theory as connecting to the development of intrinsic motivation in circus artists. Regular use of tools to build awareness of meaning, usefulness and enjoyment in the doing and learning of circus may help circus artists continue to develop their practice even when faced with instability. The same awareness may sustain circus teachers as they face their own challenges within their continued teaching practice, navigating uncertainties such as their changing role, differences in inter-generational communication, introduction of technology into teaching practice, and diversification of skills.

Self-determination theory has been applied to highly competitive sport contexts and found to positively affect subjective well-being and also to improve performance. This research on sustainability might encourage a specific study of the use of autonomy-supportive, change-oriented feedback processes in a wider context of circus higher education, to determine if indeed its regular application in a performing arts context improves physical and creative outcomes as well as self-esteem.

A Thesis Roadmap

In this research, I articulate the history of circus education, and contrast its modern development in France and in Québec from the influential model of the Moscow Circus School. The development of circus higher educational culture in Québec was shaped by circus' entrepreneurial origins as an art form "governed by profitability" (Fagot, 2006, p. 231, my translation) there, creating an enduring alignment between the emphasis on physical performance from the Russian Model and the demands of the professional circus in Québec. I articulate the

particularities of the research context at the *École nationale de cirque*, defining the role and activities of circus discipline teachers, and demands on students, teachers and the school within the North American circus milieu. I relate previous research situated there in connection with to pedagogy, evoking cognitive-behavioral, socio-constructivist, and humanist interpretations of higher education environments and the relationship between teachers and learners in circus.

I define the concept of sustainability as I came to understand it initially as a part of my hidden curriculum, and its intersection with the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Autonomy and the development of intrinsic motivation are key to sustained engagement and well-being. I share previous applications of SDT to teaching and to sports coaching environments.

I relate the elements of the research methodology used in this phenomenological approach to understanding professional circus artist's shared experiences of professional sustainability, and autonomy support. I articulate the processes I used to analyze the data from the thirteen semi-directed interviews thematically. Finally, I convey the shared meanings gleaned from the interviews via the resultant themes as they relate to both sustainability and my own reflections on my intended autonomy-supportive actions as a teacher within a performance-driven higher education circus program.

This qualitative-interpretive research speaks to my own quest for deeper understanding of the process of teaching and learning in circus higher education, and my process in particular. As all learners are different, so are all teachers. The dialogue of teaching and learning in the deeply individualized learning context of circus higher education offers us an opportunity to continue to learn in collaboration, moving together towards sustainability.

Chapter II: Literature Review, Research Site and Conceptual Framework

And you may ask yourself…Well…how did I get here?

David Byrne, *Once in a Lifetime*

The purpose of this research is to articulate the lived experiences of career sustainability as related by graduates of a professionalizing circus school. Their semi-directed interview responses continued our pedagogical dialogue; anchoring my understanding of the professional circus milieu through their vision. Their shared memories, mixed with mine, reflected their experiences of autonomy support in class with me to transform my perspectives on my teaching practice. Our pedagogical relationship had developed over years of work together as a circus discipline students and teacher at *the École nationale de cirque* in Montréal (ENC).

This chapter serves three purposes.

First, it is a review of pertinent historical literature as to the development of contemporary professionalizing circus schools, utilizing research from circus historians, circus educators, sociologists and economists. I examined literature relating to the history of circus and of circus education, hoping to develop a broad sense of the development of the experiential objectives of circus schools and the milieu they serve. I looked at the history and evolution of *the Centre national des arts de cirque* (CNAC) in France, the first Western European country to recognize circus as an art form, supported by training in a higher education circus art program and the Ministry of Culture, as articulated by art and sport sociologists Dumont (2021) and Sizorn (2019). I contrast this development of French nouveau cirque values and objectives as connected to local circus professionalizing programs, with the history of the ENC, intertwined with the entrepreneurial history of circus in Québec and North America, as researched through

circus studies connecting history, Québec culture and dramaturgy by Leroux (2016a, 2016b) and performance sociology by Fagot (2006). Funk's educational and curricular research (2024) demonstrates that both circus schools evolved from the same model of the Moscow Circus School, and yet developed different higher education programs, despite cross-pollination of directors and trans-Atlantic cultural influences between France and Québec. Both professionalizing schools served, shaped and were shaped by very different local professional circus milieu.

Second, it articulates the site of this research in the particularities of circus discipline teaching within the vocational program of the ENC. As a researcher, I locate my teaching practice not only within the current curriculum of higher education circus schools, but within the specificities of the circus culture in North America in the 21st century, and the particularities of my own professional and educational experiences. Having articulated the institutional and circus performance history influencing the development of the ENC's vocational program, I connect experiential aspects of its educational project that continue this vision of circus today. Previous researchers in circus education, pedagogy and curriculum have situated their research at the ENC in the same higher education program (Langlois, 2015; Lafortune et al., 2016; Funk, 2017; Skelling Desmeules, 2022), and have observed important shared cultural experiences within the educational environment. I summarize their educational research and observations of the relationship between circus teachers and students at the ENC, connecting their work to interpretations of educational philosophies present in the evolving pedagogical culture of the ENC. I use education and sport coaching literature to support the effective presence of humanist philosophy in the context of physical practice, and the shift from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning. I use research from curriculum studies (Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018;

Funk 2017, 2024) to identify the concept of career sustainability as a part of the hidden curriculum I as a teacher carried within the research site of circus discipline classes at the ENC.

Finally, it offers a conceptual framework of professional sustainability as applied to circus. Career sustainability as a concept has been explored in management research literature. This management literature connects sustainability to the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), a meta-theory of humanistic psychology dealing with human motivation and satisfaction of needs for self-realization through the development of autonomy, competence and relatedness. I connect Funk's 2024 concept of applied circus creativity as a part of circus curriculum learning to the capacity for adaptation identified as necessary for sustainability in the management literature. I examine literature on SDT from the fields of education psychology and sports psychology, because there has not yet been a study of SDT as applied to circus disciplinary teaching,

Performing arts education researcher Skelling Desmeules (2022, 2024) used the theory of activity to study the experiences of teachers and students in learning activities ethnographically at both the ENC and the CNAC. Professionalizing circus schools connect students to local professional communities of practice through formal and informal learning activities. These activities are transmitted by teachers who have individual perspectives on their roles, varying visions of the profession of circus artist for which they prepare students, and distinct approaches to communication (Skelling Desmeules, 2024). Teachers of differing viewpoints, experiences, and languages work within the same educational institutions and programs in professionalizing circus education. Together, they make up an identifying pedagogical culture which connects to and interprets the distinct values and mission of a professionalizing circus school, while realizing particular program objectives. I sought to use this literature review as an opportunity to

investigate the institutional culture I inhabited, the pedagogical culture I shared, and my own teaching objectives. An understanding of history is a key to understanding culture, and shapes how we see the world. How we interpret history and culture is subjective.

A brief history of Western circus, and circus education since the 18th Century

Until relatively recently, circus education was a family-only affair.

Phillip Astley, "father of the circus" in its modern sense, initiated this form in 1768 by producing shows based upon group horse manoeuvers interspersed with comedy acts and acrobatics on a thirteen-meter-wide ring in London, and later in Paris (Jacob, 2000, Wall, 2013). Across the Atlantic, Québec experienced traditional touring circus beginning with John Bill Ricketts' equestrian performances hailing from Philadelphia in 1797. The early 19th century saw the continuing evolution of this modern circus, adding ever more varied performances by actors, acrobats and clowns on invented apparatus (trapezes, ropes, object manipulation, tightwire, slackwire) in between the equestrian demonstrations. Performers and performances became more gymnastic. Jules Léotard on his flying trapeze in Paris demonstrated feats of human acrobatic performance thought impossible. (Jacob, 2002; Wall, 2013) Poetic texts and historic tableaux as performance structures eventually gave rise to the construction of circus shows centered on the importance of risk; death-defying feats essential to the sense of dangerous spectacle.

These now-called traditional circuses happened in the circus ring, in tents or permanent structures, wherein a show consisted of clowns or Ringmasters serving as links between human or animal "acts"—short demonstrative performances of a set of skills on a circus apparatus, intended to amaze and surprise and audience – the show and the individual acts building to a climactic performance moment, and then concluding with a group parade (Métais-Chastanier,

2014). On this side of the Atlantic, Québec lived the heyday of "trad" circuses and freakshows which toured the continent on trains and wagons for a hundred years. During this Grand Era of the American circus (1846-1967), residents of Québec saw 72 tours of circuses, with one original Québec touring company founded by strongmen Louis Cyr and Horace Barré (Boudreault in Leroux & Batson, 2016; Leroux in Leroux & Batson, 2016a).

The act was the all-important, recognizable, celebrated building block of the traditional circus performance. The act served to present mastery of skill and technical achievement in ever-increasing levels of difficulty and-or danger for four to seven minutes. Circus act performers became known as "artists," based on the excellence and the exceptionalism of the skills they presented (Sizorn, 2019). These circus artists were presented as superhumans of mythic proportions, or cape-wearing aristocrats of the air (Lavers, Leroux & Burtt, 2020).

Some time after 1870, heretofore aristocratic or bourgeois circus audiences began to include working class laborers in the stands. (Wall, 2013, Sizorn, 2019). "True popular culture – based on emotional and visceral appeal – emerged for the first time." (Wall, 2013, p. 160). Circuses competed with music halls and cabarets for their audiences, becoming bigger, louder, and more spectacular. It was impossible to maintain indefinitely this kind of cadence of sensationalism, ever-renewing popular appeal. By the 1930s, circus was relegated into a form of cheap, popular, predictable entertainment (Sizorn, 2019). Eventually in the Americas as in Europe, the stale formulaic pageantry of touring circuses, as well as the content of the acts themselves, stagnated. Their popularity diminished during the mid-20th century, helped along by the catastrophic demands and losses of two world wars, and the Great Depression.

In this traditional circus, the transmission of circus knowledge -- technical, aesthetic, practical and personal – happened informally, and solely through the families who had built

traditional circuses that toured Europe and the Americas (Dumont, 2021; Wall, 2013; Jacob, 2000; Sizorn, 2019; Funk, 2024). Parents taught children or spouses, in an apprenticeship or master-student relationship that created a closed loop: a lifetime of reproductive learning of tricks and acts which formed a family circus' identity (Jacob, 2000). One had to be born, adopted, or married into the circus, in order to learn its secrets and then to access the ring. The unique skills or gimmicks that created sought after, well-reputed acts had to be protected; trade secrets passed from one generation to the next.

> "This method for the transmission of skills through beginning the training at a very young age and imprinting prowess was part of the familial approach to training, and is still used by many Traditional Circus families today." (Lavers, Leroux, & Burtt, 2020, p. 108).

Learning was prescribed, potentially limited to a singular discipline, or even a singular, signature movement. The shortcomings of familial transmission can be found in this highly controlled result: passing down the same knowledge limited the vision of the possible within an act to the reproducible and the known. The known was not a guarantee of continued long-term success for families or for circuses.

> "...parents often projected their own visions of the circus onto their children and, slowly but surely, their techniques atrophied and died. A single branch that is never pruned eventually stops bearing fruit or even leaves." (Jacob in Leroux & Batson, 2016, p.33)

The reinvention necessary to transform prescriptive practices of traditional circus needed a protected space, needed specific and varied expertise, and needed dedicated time in order to reimagine what circus could offer, what it could become.

Reinvention required a school.

The Russian Model

That school was founded in Russia after the first World War. The foreign traditional circuses which had toured Czarist Russia had left the country with their performers and their family secrets after the 1917 Revolution (Wall, 2013). The first European state-sponsored circus school was established in Moscow in 1927 (Jacob, 2000, Lavers, Leroux, & Burtt, 2020). This organized, structured, state-supported circus educational institution provided not only an opportunity for circus to open itself to outsiders, but a renaissance in the very acts proposed by circus.

After the nationalization of the circuses by the Bolsheviks, who maintained that traditional circus, like ballet and opera, was a performance art that should be universally accessible, the State College of Circus and Variety Arts trained students from all over Russia who had been selected for their perceived physical potential. "Based largely on Russia's famous ballet schools, the program took an interdisciplinary approach to education," (Wall, 2013, p.33) offering acrobatics, dance, theatre, academic and multidisciplinary circus training. The Soviet four-to-seven-year training programs were then replicated throughout the Eastern bloc in the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

> "Students were selected and recruited at a very young age, the professional training was completed by a general academic curriculum, and the professional socialization allowed for a normalization of certain values and practices in circus." (Bajomi & Legendre, 2018, p.111, my translation)

The mixture of intensive gymnastic training methodologies with traditional circus skills, applied to new apparatus such as Russian bar, Russian swing and Russian cradle (Wall, 2013, Lavers, Leroux & Burtt, 2020), led to innovative acts pushing the boundaries of athletic possibility which came to be performed in the Moscow State Circus (Lavers, Leroux & Burtt, 2020) or other national circuses (Funk, 2024). Work was assured for graduates as they had been chosen and then trained to be absorbed into existing circuses or even existing roles in particular acts (Funk, 2024).

The emphasis in this model of circus education remained on the training of demonstrable prowess, focused in particular circus disciplines, presented in new, choreographed acts. Auditions evaluated physical potential before entry to the physical, artistic and academic program (Bajomi & Legendre, 2018). Students were trained by coaches in order to later perform in eastern bloc circuses: organizations that had the objective of nationalization through the form of circus popular entertainment. Individual creative expression developed in the schools had its limits, as performances served and had to comply with the state's ideology, vision, and guidance (Wall, 2013; Bajomi & Legendre 2018; Froissart, 2018). In this sense, the control, direction and prescription found in traditional family circus training continued.

> "The pedagogical method known as the Russian Model is usually taught with a one-to-one teacher to student ratio, and uses a direct method of teaching in which the skills are taught in a linear progression." (Lavers, Leroux & Burtt, 2020, p. 111).

While innovation and creation are noted as values in the Russian model, the training work was centered upon the expertise of the teacher.

> "Students had some small voice in the choice of their discipline, but disciplines and acts are generally selected by the coaches and creators of the acts, who look for certain physical and aesthetic characteristics, look at the kinds of acts that were missing from active acts, and work to create something unique for the graduating artist or troupe of artists." (Funk, 2024, p. 51)

In this directive approach, the teacher is the source of technical knowledge, the determiner of organization and skill choices, deciding upon appropriate progressions through their analytic abilities. They determine when a student is ready to go on to the next step, and inform the student of their readiness. Learning is focused on skill acquisition; performance is evaluated by demonstrated execution. The focus of the teaching curriculum in this Russian Model is the development of an act: a concrete result in a known form that then could be easily used in existing circus structures.

> The teachers aimed to re-create classic artists differentiated by their respective talents. In doing so, they adhered to and ratified a norm. They positioned themselves at the forefront of a market, aiming to produce the very best acts (and therefore the best artists). (Jacob, 2008, p. 16)

From its modern beginnings in the Moscow State College of Circus and Variety Arts, the institutionalized development of a professional circus artist thus concerned itself with the evolution of a successful product in an act, through the educational process experienced by students, who worked professionally upon graduation. This Russian model became the coaching and curricular example for the future of professionalizing circus education in Europe and in North America even today, as "coaches or directors can trace their pedagogical lineage to the early and well-established Russian experiment with circus education" (Funk, 2024, p. 54).

Nouveau Cirque and Institutionalization of Circus Education in France

In Western Europe and North America, the popularity and development of traditional circus had greatly declined following two world wars, and the ensuing population, infrastructure, and resource losses (Funk, 2017). On the heels of the social revolutions of the 1960s, circus forms in France radically changed as a new generation of performers who saw themselves as creators and innovators created travelling, accessible, evocative human physical performances (Salaméro & Noé, 2008, Cordier 2007) using circus disciplines. This *nouveau cirque* (new circus) offered "a circus that showed the poetic essence of acrobatics and its dramatic power and ignored the temptation to yield to illusion, virtuosity, and technical skills" (Dumont, 2021, p. 190). Ringmasters, tents, animals and often virtuosic performativity were rejected as artifacts of traditional circus (Jacob, 2002). Circus performance in France required collaborative invention, a collective approach, the capacity to create in a team, and to live in artistic communities.

> This new way of thinking and undertaking creative processes established new conditions for the production of art, based on libertarian and egalitarian principles that responded to a desire for freedom and equality. (Dumont, 2021, p. 191)

As in Russia, transmission by family knowledge was no longer the only pathway to learning skills, for "…in New Circus, circus skills were taught to anyone who wanted to learn them." (Lavers, Leroux & Burtt, 2020). Traditional circus in France and elsewhere had been collapsing under the weight of its formulas – and this *nouveau cirque* required artists who possessed a multiplicity of skills (music, theatre, movement) beyond physical prowess, and could embody new aesthetic and theatrical expressions using circus as their form or language. (Lavers, Leroux & Burtt, 2020). Yet these artists needed physical, creative and dramaturgical training in order to evolve their work within circus' physical techniques.

France saw the creation of two new schools in 1974: The *École nationale de cirque*, by Annie Fratellini and Pierre Étaix, and the *Centre de formation aux arts et technique du cirque et du mime,* by Alexis Grüss and Sylvia Monfort. Fratellini and Grüss, both members of surviving traditional circus dynasties, knew of and were inspired by the model of circus education offered in Moscow (Wall, 2013; Sizorn, 2019; Lavers, Leroux & Burtt, 2020; Dumont, 2021, Funk 2024). Their schools provided the bridge to the professionalization of circus training in France and its legitimization, preparing the future performers of the *nouveau cirque* movement using traditional approaches and techniques. (Purovaara, 2014, Dumont, 2021). The content of these programs was deeply disciplinary, physical and directive in its approach (Funk, 2024). The creation of these program began the process of redefining circus as an art form in France, worthy of institutionalization, and its ensuing acceptance as an art form (Sizorn, 2019; Dumont, 2021). "The establishment of these schools, the first in western Europe, were expected to achieve a particular aim: that the circus be viewed as an art form" (Sizorn, 2019, p. 358). The "artification" of circus training (as Sizorn terms it) began in these schools, open to everyone (by audition), using training in dance, music and theatre (in addition to circus disciplines), creating work destined to be performed on the street, in theatres, or in tents, work which was collectively devised and cooperative (Froissart, 2018; Dumont, 2021.) Their graduates transformed the idea of circus in France and in Europe through this larger *nouveau cirque*, rejecting the act as a necessary structural element, experimenting with larger narrative, scenography, and aesthetic drivers of circus performance (Dumont, 2021).

As circus training became protected and defended in these structured, academic programs, circus performance and education found dedicated national support from the government of France (Funk, 2024). Institutionalized circus education helped circus to be

recognized as an artistic milieu in France, a performing art supported by national financing such as the unemployment program for performers (aka "*les intermittents du spectacle*"). Circus artists did not only execute acrobatic choreographies while also being responsible for installing their materials or tents; they were authors of their own works that sought to challenge, transform or innovate live performance (Dumont, 2021). The creation of art required periods of reflection and development. Circus artists, like other performing artists in France, would have some measure of employment security in their field, an acknowledgement that the work of a circus artist occurs *hors piste* as well as onstage, that it is generative, creative, and preparative as well as performative.

> "…government policies and resource provision aimed to promote artistic creation in the circus. This generated a change in the economic model for circuses, which had previously been organized as private businesses. It also influenced the identity of circus artists." (Sizorn, 2019, p. 360)

The *Centre National des Arts de Cirque* (CNAC) was created in France in 1986, a government recognized and state-sponsored professionalizing program dedicated to the formal training of future circus artists. (Dumont, 2021; Jacob, 2002). The CNAC has experienced differing ideas around transmission of circus knowledge and creative practices in its teaching staff (circus artists, sports coaches, and performing artists) and directors as a part of its institutional evolution. (Legendre, 2014). "(Richard) Kubiak, supported by the advocates of a 'conventional' circus, prioritized technique and prowess, whereas (Guy) Caron emphasized the show as a whole and original creations" (Sizorn, 2019, p. 361). Bernard Turin revised its structure and curriculum in 1990, moving away from an emphasis on a technical prowess developed via a directive teacher-student relationship, towards the development of innovative,

interdisciplinary, creative performers through the addition to the curriculum of workshop transmission by contemporary creators from a myriad of artistic disciplines, and collective creation practices (Wall, 2013; Jacob, 2008; Sizorn, 2019). As the first European arts school, the CNAC's vision of the future of circus arts emphasized the development of creative work and future companies in France, its recruiting nourished by the development of a network of French preparatory circus schools (Jacob, 2002).

> "…it is a contemporary art form which entails… multiple aesthetic forms which respond well to the endless logic of opposition that has characterized it for 200 years…contradicting perfection, and inciting evolution." (Jacob, 2002, p. 179, my translation)

Circus education became professionalizing, higher education, as the very profession was being redefined as an important part of French artistic culture, continually challenging existing traditions as a contemporary art form through creative processes. In France, the national social system in support of circus as a creative art form made the evolution of experimental, collaborative creation on different scales viable, thus reinvigorating circus as a performing art in France.

Nouveau Cirque evolves differently in the New World

> Québec's brand of theatrical, mostly animal-free contemporary circus born out of French nouveau cirque, Soviet-inspired elite acrobatic training, and American entrepreneurship and showmanship, has emerged from a burgeoning nation preoccupied with its own singularity and distinctiveness. (Leroux in Tait & Lavers, 2016b, p. 562)

Across the Atlantic Ocean, similar 20th century social changes led to the founding and establishment of the *École nationale de cirque* in 1981 in Montreal. Yet the programs of the ENC, while also based on the Russian Model, would connect differently within a North American professional culture that recognizes entrepreneurship and individualism more than collective creation. On this American continent, the cultural identities born from pioneering spirit, rugged individualism and self-determined uniqueness had influenced the evolution of circus as business for 200 years (Leroux, 2016a). In Montreal, the nascent seeds of a soon-to-be renowned school and a fulminating period of development in circus arts were sown during Québec's Quiet Revolution, thanks to the abutment of performing arts and sport in a little community center gym on rue Papineau.

Montréal had come to the world's attention during the Expo '67 and the 1976 Olympic Games. Street theatre and artistic happenings publicly presented during those international events required space for development of ideas and knowledge --for the development of skills related to artistic and physical performance. André Simard, a Canadian national gymnast and coach, ran a gymnastics club out of the *Centre d'Immaculée-Conception* which gave entertaining public performances in addition to acrobatic training (Jacob & Vézina, 2007). Chocolat (aka Rodrigue Tremblay), a professional clown, asked to be able to work with fellow artists interested in physical theatre in the space, alongside the gymnasts. "The clowns practiced with the athletes, which added a little bit of fantasy to the lives of the latter" (Jacob & Vezina, 2007, p. 28, my translation). Dancers, street performers, gymnasts, and actors began to collaborate and to exchange in developing skills and performances. Chocolat worked in a clown trio with a man named Guy Caron. André Simard coached a gymnast named Pierre Leclerc. The ensuing multiple collaborations of Caron, Leclerc and Simard gave rise to the beginnings of an accredited

professionalizing circus school (ENC), as well as international circus companies, a theatre dedicated to circus (the TOHU), a professional circus association (En Piste) and an entire cultural sector in Québec and Canada within the next twenty-five years.

I should mention that the few texts I located which related the specificity of the history of National Circus School (ENC) at the time of writing were created as celebrations of its history (Jacob & Vezina, 2007, written for the 25th anniversary of the school's founding), or as explanations of curricular developments specific to ENC in documents developed by FEDEC (the International Network for Professional Circus Education, which today represents more than 83 member schools in 30 different countries).

L'école nationale de cirque in Montréal (ENC) was founded by Caron and Leclerc in 1981, based upon the model of a circus school Caron he had experienced himself as a student in Hungary, a satellite school of the Moscow School (Jacob & Vezina, 2007). The development of pluridisciplinary skills in an atmosphere of creativity and fun was at the heart of the original ENC project. At the school's beginnings, teachers were also students and everyone was a performer (as performing was an integral part of the school offer, and Montréal was hungry for performance). There was a fluid relationship between the school, circus disciplines, artistic gymnasts and coaches, dancers, physical performers and the company *Cirque du Soleil* (founded in 1984) for many years, with porous definitions of student-teacher-performer status until the early 1990s. *Cirque du Soleil* contracted the school to create and train acts destined for their shows in the late 1980s (Jacob & Vezina, 2007; Leroux, 2016a). Caron was both the director of the school and the Artistic Director of *Cirque du Soleil* beginning in 1985, before going to France to direct the CNAC for a few years. The ENC gained notoriety as its students won

international festivals with innovative work presented in the known, accepted, essential form of circus acts.

Naming the school *l'École nationale de cirque* at its beginnings (without specifying if this referred to Québec as a nation, or Canada as a nation) symbolically put the program on the path to formal structure, and circus arts to national recognition, without initial support from Canadian or provincial funding bodies in culture or in education. International recognition of Québec circus began with the popular and critical triumph of *Cirque du Soleil* with "*Le cirque réinventé*" in Los Angeles in 1987, and the ensuing tour of *Nouvelle Expérience* in the USA from 1989-1994 (Leroux in Leroux & Batson, 2016a). This "reinvented circus" was in structure a traditional one without animals, based on a succession of highly athletic and virtuosic acts, presented with a coherent and innovative aesthetic of costumes, scenography and music under a Big Top (Jacob, 2002). Québec's circus artists

> "constantly push the boundaries of performance and reinforce the idea that there are no physical limits. As with classical circuses, the *Cirque du Soleil* centers its creative process and recruitment on the athletic quality of its performers" (Fagot, 2006, p. 233, my translation).

The beginnings of *Cirque du Soleil* intertwined with the beginnings of the ENC, as acts developed at the school were chosen to be a part of these seminal shows that shaped the international image of distinctive circus made in Québec.

> "What has made Québec circus so compelling to North American audiences is its hybrid nature: American showmanship and commercial acumen, European artistic

> sophistication, Eastern European elite circus training technique, and Québec's particularly rich creativity." (Leroux in Leroux & Batson, 2016a, p. 52)

Québec circus is a professional culture that was and is still in evolution (Legendre, 2014). Graduates of the ENC prior to the establishment of the DEC program in 1996 soon went on to found their own companies. These companies endure today as internationally recognized, entrepreneurial endeavors that have been supported by public funding (*Cirque Éloize, Les 7 doigts de la main, Cirque Alphonse*) and which use the circus act as the compositional building block within the dramaturgy of their shows. These companies hired and continue to hire later generations of graduates of ENC (amongst other circus artists). Members of those subsequent generations of ENC graduates have now gone on to create their own Canadian companies, projects and festivals (Throw 2 Catch, Machine de Cirque, Barcode, La Croustade, People Watching, Projet Sanctuaire, Marguerite à Bicyclette, Les Foutoukours, St. John's International Circus Fest to name a few), all of which benefit from public municipal, provincial and national funding in addition to self-production order to tour provincially and-or internationally. It is interesting to note that not all of these younger companies identify acts as driving their creative process or dramaturgy. The *Conseil des Arts et Lettres de Québec* officially recognized circus arts in 2001; and Canada Arts Council offered funding specific to circus as an art form in 2009, notably recognizing the ENC in its very definition of circus arts as a field of practice in Canada (Fields of Practice, n.d.).

> "… professionalization benefits the school in its efforts to attract both government funding and students. It also benefits students in their endeavors to secure arts council funding and employment opportunities." (Rantisi & Leslie, 2015, p. 408-409)

The legitimization of circus as an art form is intertwined with the existence of now two higher education circus programs in the province.

It is important to note that official national recognition of circus as an art form arrived much later in the history of circus in Canada than in its history in France. National, provincial and local funding support for arts and artistic careers in Canada is much less available than that of France, a country with almost twice Canada's population, and a very different culture with respect to the arts. The nature of the entrepreneurial Canadian circus culture (Leroux in Leroux & Batson, 2016a, Fagot, 2006) necessitates an emphasis on the ability of ENC graduates to succeed in pursuing individual employment through existing companies, using their capacity for self-marketing and promotion. The circus act seemingly serves as a living snapshot of circus artists' technical skills and performer qualities, easily manageable for directors and casting agents (Funk, 2017). Since its beginnings, the education of the circus artist through the development of pluridisciplinarity alongside development and performance of their circus act has been at the heart of the ENC program's evolution, and its recognition (Lachance & Venne, 2004; Québec & Arendasova, 2004; Lalonde, 2014). The school's nearly forty-five-year history does not detail great shifts in its objectives or pedagogical orientation in available documentation.

It took fifteen years to establish the school a as an independent private circus school offering a *Diplôme d'études collégiales* (DEC) in circus arts recognized by Québec's Ministry of Education (1996), a process which then made the school eligible to receive supporting provincial cultural and educational grants (Vachon et al., 2000). Additionally, the DEE (*diplôme d'études de l'établissement*) is a school certificate, intended for those students who will not be able to successfully complete the academic components of the DEC program. "…the DEC diploma is…

offered as a three-year vocational degree, covering the core academic requirements and preparing students for direct entry into the workforce" (Funk, 2017, p. 21).

In this sense, the DEC-DEE prepares a skilled labor force of circus artists, ready to begin working in the Canadian or international contexts upon graduation. Canada supports higher education in visual and performing arts through annual grants from the Canadian Arts Training Fund of the Canadian Heritage ministry: a process that requests information regularly on student success rates seen through employment during the year following graduation (Canadian Heritage, 2024). Circus education is costly, requiring dedicated space, specialized equipment, specialized knowledge in safety and in training, and low teacher-student ratios in order to support the personalized development of individual performers, and in Canada, incurring significant heating and lighting costs during winter training months. Circus arts higher education programs here depend upon funding from multiple public sources (municipal, provincial, and federal), as well as private donations, in order to sustain their programs and their students through scholarships or grants from school foundations. In this sense, circus educational institutions in Canada are under pressure to demonstrate the value of their vocational programs through the rapid, successful employability of their graduates.

The ENC moved to its current location within Montreal's Cite des arts de cirque in 2003: a glass and steel 7-story "influential Tower of Babel" (Jacob in Leroux & Batson, 2016, p. 33) which is now home to approximately 85 internationally diverse students per year in the DEC-DEE program (as well as multiple other programs in teacher training, high school, preparatory, and recreational studies, a circus dedicated library, and an independent circus research entity, HUPR, the Centre for human potential research).

In France and in Québec, the institutionalization of professionalizing circus programs led to the recognition of circus as an art form by respective national governments, worthy of publicly funded (and also privately funded in the Canadian instance) cultural and educational support. Yet professionalizing circus schools in France and in Québec developed differently, coming from different cultural perspectives of circus as a performing art.

The guiding model of these programs at their inception was that of the Moscow State College for Circus and Variety Arts and its Eastern European satellites. This model followed the example of sports in recruiting students with perceived physical potential at a young age, and then sought to create exceptional acts: acts that emphasized demonstration of distinctive acrobatic virtuosity, contextualized through choreographic precision. This model continued a pattern of transmission as had been experienced in circus families or sport training, wherein teachers chose, decided, organized, planned, permitted and evaluated individual student efforts in disciplinary training in service of an act. The values of traditional circus of the 19th century continue in this centering of professionalizing circus education around the production of an act today, using virtuosic performance to promote distinctive performer identities as an evaluated program objective.

> …the preparation of acts involves an entirely different discourse to that which justifies the training of creative artists and their own art forms. This is an ambiguous issue among the (FEDEC) participants: some take the principle of the act for granted while others do not even see it as a pre-requisite. There are places where acts can be created and places where they are not deemed to be important. The artist trained in each of these places will go on to fuel this respective market sector. (Jacob, 2008, p. 15)

Higher education in circus has become a legitimate and known path to a career as a circus artist. Though professionalizing programs around the world have based their programs from the initial model of the Moscow School, these programs have developed distinct identities, curricular foci, and values despite their similar origins (Funk, 2024), in preparing students for a local and international working contexts. These differences have influenced the development of the local professional milieu, as much as the local milieu continues to influence the evolution of the circus schools (Jacob, 2008). The ENC, like the other 14 degree-granting FEDEC member higher education circus schools, has developed its particular curriculum, its programs and its individual institutional identity over the last forty years to offer students diverse educational experiences to prepare them as circus artists for both a national and an international milieu (Boutet-Lanouet 2017, Froissart, 2018, Skelling Desmeules, 2022).

The Research Context: Disciplinary Circus Teaching at the ENC

> "There's a culture. Whatever school you leave, you leave with a culture, a way of doing things and we have our way and the other schools have their way."
>
> (Langlois in Campbell, 2018)

My research focuses on the experiences of graduates who worked with me in disciplinary classes in the professionalizing program at the *École nationale de cirque,* as their principal primary discipline teacher (often referred to as their "major" specialization), their secondary teacher in their primary discipline (a role which indicates shared workload between teachers within the allotted primary discipline hours), or as their teacher of their complementary discipline (often referred to as a "minor" specialization) (Funk, 2017). The ENC is a professionalizing higher education circus school offering a degree or certification (DEC-DEE)

which signifies vocational readiness. Its curriculum is deeply rooted in extensive physical practice, offering some academic content in support of professionalization (Funk, 2017).

As in the Russian Model, the discipline curriculum of the ENC culminates in the creation of a formally evaluated circus act by each student or duo. This act is a vehicle demonstrating the skill and creative development of the student that then serves as a means for various circus employers to identify the singularity and the performative strengths of the graduate. "Equipping students with an act for this kind of market can be seen as a driving force in much circus training" (Lavers, Leroux & Burtt, 2020, p. 112).

Circus discipline teachers work with students (individually or in small groups) in their chosen "primary discipline" during each session, between 4-8 hours per week (within the 25+ hours per week of physical practice in their curriculum). These teachers facilitate students' discipline-focused training, toward the eventual objective of the development of a short work that is presented internally to the learning community and graded at the end of every session over their three years of study. This pattern of act development for presentation each Fall and Winter session (on average, twelve weeks of course-work per session) is generally viewed as cumulative preparation for the *Épreuve Synthèse*, or the juried final exam performance, at the end of their course of study.

In their *Épreuve Synthèse* work, students perform their devised, highly choreographed and practiced acts, as well as a text in French, which conveys their creative process and personal expression, for an invited audience of friends, family, faculty and future employers. Students conceptualize a lighting plan, costume design, musical choices which seek to express their overarching concept in congruence with their virtuosic choreographic choices. Internal and external jurors grade act performances as passing or failing, and offer written feedback on

composition and performance qualities to the graduating students a few weeks after the ES performance. Immediately following the performance, graduates have an opportunity to engage with casting and artistic directors in a celebratory social context in the hopes of initiating or deepening professional connections. Indeed, throughout the three-year program, students connect with important actors in the local and international milieu in the context of courses that teach best practices for presentation, self-marketing and promotion, or of expectations of professional behaviors and conditions once employed (Boutet-Lanouet et al., 2017; Skelling Desmeules, 2024).

Circus discipline teachers at the ENC plan their classes within a larger vision of the three-year program, working in support of each student's individual learning with a view to that student's goals and to their employability as professional circus artists. This can be a complex role, as "today's circus artists are expected to be not only performers but creators, capable of proposing ideas as much as following directions" (Lafortune et al, 2016, p .240). Additionally, teachers often work in teams with another discipline teacher and an artistic advisor beginning in a student's second year of study. Ideally, they will navigate teaching collaboratively in support of a student's project; supporting the growth of students' physical skills, their compositional process, and their performance qualities through the development of an act. Different teachers will have different perspectives on how their work with students might connect with this layered higher education of a human who practices circus to become a skilled creator, performer and athlete (as "circus artist" can be seen in our Canadian context).

> "…the definition of what is "artistic" can vary from one school to another, from one teacher to another, but, no matter their perspective, the question of articulating technique

> and sensitivity is always at the heart of pedagogical preoccupations.” (Froissart, 2018, p. 81, my translation)

Working with pressure

Employability immediately (within a year) following graduation is a culturally important, short-term benchmark of success for students, faculty and the ENC as a school; a practical demonstration which could be assumed as a measure that curriculum and teaching practices work. “The placement rate for ENC graduates exceeds 95% on average” (École nationale de cirque, 2023). This 95% placement measure figure has been noted in multiple sources (Rantisi & Leslie, 2015, Langlois, 2015).

> It's worth noting that training institutions are always keen to promote the work of their graduates, in the knowledge that the professional world is observing them “not just with curiosity, but with a growing interest in the new 'products' shaped by years of learning, research and evaluation." (Jacob, 2008, p. 23 in Skelling Desmeules, 2022, p. 192)

There is an implicit pressure in the colloquial commodification of graduates through their acts resulting from three years of study, graduates as “products” for an industry that is fueled by acts (Jacob, 2008). This pressure has been noted by multiple *in situ* researchers as being carried and managed by students (Langlois, 2015, Lafortune et al., 2016, Skelling Desmeules, 2022), teachers (LaFortune et al., 2016), and the ENC itself as an institution, which must repeatedly demonstrate the quality of the high caliber training it offers to public and to private financial supporters (i.e. Canada Heritage - Canadian Arts Training Fund; *Fondation de l’ENC*) through the visible and measurable success of its graduates in their rapid employment.

Yet it is known that in circus, "…unlike many fields of training, it's not the end of the curriculum that marks entry into the profession, but the accumulation of experience that helps to define their artistic identity, understand the professional milieu and develop networks" (Skelling Desmeules, 2022, p. 196-197, my translation) all of which will facilitate longer-term careers in circus arts (Funk, 2017). Professional employers have often called for the development of apprenticeships (Jacob, 2008) as a further experiential transition into the profession, improving connections between the needs of professional companies and the competencies developed by recent graduates. Even during the regular course of study, it is not often not possible for the program to offer extracurricular experiential performance opportunities for all students, because each additional experience requires a significant additional financial, spatial and temporal investment. Student schedules are packed for most of the year with physical practice and academic coursework, homework, and student jobs to meet rising costs of education (Skelling Desmeules, 2022).

Additionally, the contemporary circus artist in 2025 will be asked to work in widely diverse contexts, all with different demands (Lavers, Leroux & Burtt, 2020). They may need to be able to contribute to collaborative, group-devised work shaped by a director, or to self-direct and transform a solo act to the specific demands of a corporative commercial performance; to contribute to creative process, to learn established choreographies, and to demonstrate or to disguise acrobatic prowess. "The independent circus performer, often working on short contracts, has to become adaptable so as to be able to move easily between these different work environments and expectations" (Lavers Leroux & Burtt, 2020, p. 113). It is impossible for any professionalizing program to prepare students for all possible career contexts, in particular when those opportunities are growing and changing continually. In FEDEC's survey of competencies

required for the profession, employability as a contemporary circus artist demands adaptability, autonomy and creativity in addition to skill (Herman, 2009).

I mention this pressure (internalized or external) to support student success as understood through rapid employability as a potential conscious or unconscious objective of teaching within circus arts higher education at the ENC – in particular, because of the entrepreneurial character of North American circus culture, and the limited presence of public arts funding. It is important to recognize this particularity of the professional milieu on this continent. Employability here most often means working for an existing company or project, instead of developing one's own. The graduating act and the choices surrounding it take on enormous significance when it is perceived as the key to getting a job, or if it is seen as a part of a portfolio -- one example of a skills-fueled creative process, a structuring educational project.

> If the reputation of the circus school attended influences the way a graduate is viewed, and can thus favor their integration into the profession (Boutet-Lanouette et al., 2017), that of the coach with whom students have evolved can also play in their favor, and vice versa, in that the success of a student's performance during his or her studies and on leaving school can favor the reputation of a coach with whom they are primarily associated. (Skelling Desmeules, 2022, p. 187, my translation)

In Skelling Desmeules' observation, performance is all important. School performance influences the employability of students; coach performance can also affect their attractiveness to employers; and coach reputation and school reputation are furthered by positive student performance.

The objective of rapid employment for students may function as an extrinsic motivation that is more or less integrated (Deci & Ryan, 1987, 2000) for a disciplinary circus teacher. It, as much as our personal teaching & learning histories, can affect how we approach teaching circus in professionalizing higher education. In Chapter 4, I will discuss its presence in my own teaching practice as was evidenced through this research.

Previous Research on Teaching and Learning, specific to the ENC context

The past fifteen years have seen an explosion of research in circus arts within the particular setting of the ENC, thanks to the promotion of circus research through the Montreal Working Group on Circus Research (at Concordia), and the Center for Research, Innovation and Transfer in Circus Arts (the CRITAC) at the ENC, now known as HUPR – the Centre for Human Potential Research. Certain studies which took place within the ENC shed light on the particularities of its environment, objectives and approaches, the complexities of the teacher-student relationship, and the curriculum. These research projects connect to currents of thought in education: behaviorism, socio-constructivism, and humanism. Multiple lenses through which to view the work of teaching in higher circus education exist and are promoted, consciously or unconsciously, by the wide variety of teachers at the ENC, who juggle the individualization of course objectives in collaboration with each other, and with the students they teach.

Dr. Jon Burtt, in his study of the introduction of Decision Training (Vickers et al., 2004) as a teaching methodology at the ENC, articulated a circus discipline class as having two foci: general physical fitness, and disciplinary skill development. This fitness and skill development occur through vocabulary acquisition and mastery, experimentation with compositional structures for the act, and interpretative work towards developing movement for that act. (Lafortune et al., 2016).

> In general, circus training tends to replicate sports approaches, which are often characterized as behaviorist. (Lafortune et al., 2016, p. 241).

Burtt's 2011 action research implementing tools from Dr. Joan Vickers' Decision Training in sports into specialty training at the ÉNC revealed inherent challenges in shifting from directive teaching to active learning incorporating some autonomy-encouraging and behaviorist cognitivist learning strategies. It also exposed teachers' difficulties in experimenting with new strategies when under limited time to deliver student performance results. Decision Training intends to support cognitive skill development in athletes who become able to self-regulate, adapting and correcting their own performances through a methodology that involves their active, agentic participation. By activating students' ability to plan and evaluate their own actions in classwork training and creation, it was hoped to improve students' long-term performance results.

This research also brings to light differences in perspectives of what we do in teaching (also called coaching, or training), interpreting not only the responsibilities of teaching, but how we are comfortable doing them.

> Traditional (circus) training often consists of blocked practice whereby skills are acquired separately through a progression, from the basic to the complex, under the strict control of a trainer who directs, evaluates, corrects, and motivates the student" using immediate, direct feedback (Lafortune et. al, p. 241).

In this "traditional" vision, the circus teacher works to transform the performance behaviors of the learner towards consistent, successful results in execution, using positive (e.g. positive verbal feedback) and negative reinforcement (e.g. removing additional repetitions

because a skill has been mastered) as a means to augment the production of the desired behavior (Vienneau, 2017). The behaviorist concept of teaching and learning in circus places the teacher and their expertise at the center of the learning experience, responsible for correctly stimulating a desired behavior, evaluating it, and creating situations for its repetition until it becomes ingrained (Vienneau, 2017). Historians and researchers have noted the important influence of this school of thought in many professionalizing circus schools (Lavers, Leroux & Burtt, 2020), perpetuated by the presence of teachers who themselves have been trained behaviorally as competitive athletes (Salamero & Noé, 2012), valued for their abilities to analyze movement and teach acrobatic precision as teacher-coaches. Behavioral training engenders quick improvements in performance (Vickers et al., 2004), yet learner-athletes become dependent on feedback, and performance often stagnates or regresses over time. Decision Training, as a cognitive approach, seeks to ensure long-term performance gains by putting the learner in the driver's seat of their goal-setting and analysis.

Burtt notes that at the ENC, the existing learning style of students, and the teaching styles of teachers affected how they integrated the new pedagogical tools. Of the three pairs of students-teachers working in the study, the duo that reported the most ease and success within the implementation of Decision Training worked together wherein there was no pressure to produce a short-term internal public evaluation for the student's work, nor was there a necessity to work creatively. Their discipline, the trampoline, was explored entirely with skills-based objectives.

Teachers who valued long-term development of student autonomic skills, teachers who valued a collaborative teaching and learning relationship, were more at ease with implementing Decision Training approaches than a directive teacher who experienced a feeling of loss of

control and inefficiency in producing results, potentially damaging the student's performance. The necessity of producing an act for end of session evaluation added considerable stress to the research process, as two teachers felt responsible for student success in the graded presentations.

> …the interpersonal dynamics of each teacher/student team was unique and each learning situation evolved within its own parameters. It is essential to acknowledge the wide variation inherent in human relationships; in this case both teacher and student has to adapt to each other's teaching and learning style and use all means possible to maximize their working relationship. (Lafortune et al., 2016, p.263)

That teacher-student working relationship is often a deeply personal one. In her MA Thesis in Education (2015), Amanda Langlois, an education researcher, herself a former student in the higher education program at the ENC, interviewed graduates of the ENC about their experiences of the lived curriculum of the DEC-DEE program. In relation to the perception of teachers, she noted at that time that the graduates felt their discipline teachers had functioned as "emotional supporters," for them as students, and potentially became like family members;

> …they leaned on their technical coaches because they felt that they could develop relationships with their coaches, who understood them as circus artists, and who had often already worked in circus arts themselves. (Langlois, 2014, p. 95)

Langlois' qualitative research examined graduates' perspectives of lived curricular experiences at the ÉNC, and noted the complexity of their often-emotional responses to remembered context. She identified the ENC as a community of collaborative learners, wherein circus knowledge was constructed through experiences and social interactions amongst students, and between students and teachers in an apprenticeship-like learning relationship. She posits a

socio-constructivist, student-centered approach in education supports the functioning of circus as an art form in both its educational and professional spheres. Teachers or more experienced peers work in relationship with individual students to help them continually navigate their "proximal zone of development," (Vienneau, 2017, p. 185), stretching their existing capacities, supporting their ability to learn challenging information they could not manage without expert mediation. In this vision, the role of teacher shifts from that of a master dispensing information and installing efficient behaviors, to that of someone with more knowledge or expertise who helps someone else learn for themselves. Learners have their own distinct knowledge, and construct new knowledge based on their collective experiential learning with each other as a cohort group. Circus, Langlois notes, celebrates the strengths and uniqueness of each member of these communities of learners. Their social relationships enable them to persevere during periods of emotional and artistic growth, making them able to find pleasure in the intensity of their education. When students understood the usefulness, the practical application of curriculum content, they actively engaged.

> When the students had more responsibility for their own learning, and engaged in active learning experiences, they tended to perceive the courses more positively. (Langlois, 2016, p. 109)

Dr. Alisan Funk continued the study of curriculum in her MA Research (2017), interviewing students, teachers and administrators to investigate stakeholder perceptions of academic vs. vocational content within the curricula of the two higher education circus schools in Canada: the ENC and the *École de cirque de Québec*. She found a similarity of understandings of the importance of the kinesthetic learning objectives as related to the professionalization of circus artists, but a disparity of perceptions of the academic content,

sometimes viewed as useless or antagonistic to the artistic educational development by students and teachers alike. Her research explored and articulated student, teacher and administrator views of the hidden, null, explicit and implicit curriculum within the DEC-DEE programs.

> A curriculum that favors development of a circus "artist" will go beyond the technical, beyond the artistic and the creative, and include conceptual and intellectual challenges. If Circus Arts wishes to be considered among other fine arts, circus artists must be able to reflect and interpret cultural and emotional experiences, they must be able to speak verbally and symbolically to those outside of circus arts. For this to happen, the inclusion of academic content during the educational process is essential. Core knowledge "requirements" connect circus artists to human history, culture, and contemporary knowledge. They become Circus Artists because of these curricular elements, not in spite of them; critical reflection is an essential, not parallel, pursuit. (Funk, 2017, p. 116)

While Funk's research centers on curriculum and not the relationship of teachers and students, she does note that "teachers believe students experience a learning atmosphere unusually focused on the individual, due to the number of solo and small-group courses that students take" (Funk, 2017, p. 103). The ENC's particular structure of small class sizes as noted by Burtt, Langlois and Funk, enables circus teachers to adapt and personalize the disciplinary course content to support the physical, artistic, and creative development of each student, in the hopes that each student will innovate within their practice, and develop their singularity.

> As circus knowledge has become accessible, these (higher education circus schools) have both breathed life into a stagnating professional aesthetic and simultaneously committed to the modern humanism philosophy that an education within the arts provides access to

knowledge that the individual will combine in new and productive ways. (Funk, 2024, p. 68)

Humanistic education developed in relation with humanist psychology in the 1960s, and has many points of intersection with socio-constructivist thinking (Vienneau, 2017). As articulated by Carl Rogers in his seminal text on humanistic education, *Freedom to Learn*, this movement seeks to support the growth of learners who can make choices and direct themselves, who can critique and evaluate, who can develop pertinent skills, who can adapt and find solutions to problems using their creativity and experience, who can take action and be responsible, who can cooperate…all essential qualities for the contemporary circus artist as articulated by FEDEC in a study of larger professional competencies (Hermann, 2009). Rogers added that holistic humanistic education would create people "who work, not for the approval of others, but in terms of their own socialized purposes." (Rogers, 1969, p. 388)

This idea of not working for approval, central to facilitating learning in a student-centered approach in arts education, can be challenging for educators, administrators and those who direct the professional milieu. If teachers are no longer "instructors," controlling and dispensing information, where lies accountability in the promotion of student success? The essential change is in the concept that teachers become responsible not for assuring student success, but for creating a clear learning environment in which students can thrive. When standards, objectives or expectations are made evident and maintained, and students understand those frameworks, and can even personalize those objectives, then both facilitator and learner have the freedom to work in dialogue within an engaging, autonomy-supportive context (Rogers, 1968, Smith et al., 2017). This context is rooted in a belief in the learner's inherent capacity to make intelligent choices, and embraces learning as a long-term process, rather than focusing on

immediate results. In such a student-centered learning-environment, teacher and student relationships are not governed by a difference of power, but a mutual positive respect in acknowledgement of their different responsibilities.

Humanism in sport coaching

Sports coaching has been examining the utility of humanistic approaches in coaching and coach training, examining controlling vs. autonomy-supporting behaviors in high performance contexts (Cassidy, 2010, Nelson et al., 2014). An athlete-centered approach to coaching in certain contexts challenges commonly accepted functioning of coaching, which can be prescriptive and often authoritarian, with coaches as holders of knowledge deemed valuable and athletes as passive recipients of this knowledge (Nelson et al., 2014). Certain coaches resist including athletes in decision-making or analysis, fearing that they would appear "weak" by doing so. In sport, folk pedagogies have evolved which reinforce and re-produce these traditional approaches so often associated with producing success.

> …the coach remains accountable for individual and team performance, especially in elite sports, and coaches' effectiveness and future employment opportunities are frequently determined by the success of the athlete/team. As such, coaches often strive to control as many variables of coaching as they can. (Nelson et al.,2014, p. 13)

Existing research specific to the curriculum and pedagogical culture at the ENC demonstrates that a multiplicity of perspectives of educational approaches exist there simultaneously: behaviorist, cognitive-behaviorist, socio-constructivist, humanist…Through my research, I found myself most aligned with the tenets of humanistic education within professionalizing circus education. Educational cultures in high-performance sport, as well as higher education, have been examining learner or athlete-centered approaches to examine their

usefulness in long-term, holistic development. Humanistic sports coaching literature insists that there is no one-size-fits all approach to coaching – that the objective (support of the athlete-learner's process and potential) does not dictate a uniform behavior or response to promote effective learning. Sports coaches, like circus discipline teachers, are constantly adapting to the needs of the people in front of them (Nelson et al, 2014), supporting the object of the development of the whole person.

Connecting to My Hidden Curriculum within the Research Context

In another research project centered in higher education at the ENC, Dr. Marie-Eve Skelling Desmeules used the Theory of Activity to examine experiential learning both at the ENC and at the CNAC, a systemic look at the professionalizing activities offered by the schools as lived by the students and teachers who participate directly in them.

> All the different experiences of professional socialization inside and outside the school contribute to the uniqueness of this type of training, where the learner defines himself as an artist in relation to what exists. (Skelling Desmeules, 2022, p. 192)

Skelling Desmeules demonstrates that the final outcome of professionalizing learning activity within the school experience follows from the object of the exercise or activity. This object can be examined from the point of view of the subject (in her study, students) as connected to the community of direct and indirect participants (school community).

In this sense, I thought better identifying the object of teaching, my teaching, within the context of the disciplinary circus course could affect the actual expression of its outcomes.

In my initial reflexive examination of my teaching practice, I began to look at my own ideas around promoting autonomy and creative adaptability (Gube & Lajoie, 2020) within the

larger framework of discipline course objectives and evaluations. I recognized that autonomy support and creativity challenges deeply influenced how I developed learning activities within the discipline classes I taught, how I interpreted the explicit curriculum. I determined that supporting professional sustainability was not a pedagogical objective explicitly expressed as a learning outcome of the circus discipline classes I taught, but was rather a "Hidden Curriculum" (HC) (Vienneau, 2017, p. 44) I carried through my daily work with students in class.

Hidden curricula can be multiple within a learning context, encompassing all the things that are taught which are not a part of the explicit, written down, official curriculum (such as behavioral expectations, values or social norms). "The hidden curriculum is important because it focuses attention beyond the participant experiences, and on the messages that are sent and received in educational settings that were not purposely intended" (Langlois, 2015, p. 26). Most literature refers to the HC as an unarticulated curriculum that supports the dominant ideology of the deciders of the explicit curriculum (Funk, 2024). In my use of the term, I am referencing that within the context of a circus disciplinary class with its highly individualized course content, I as a teacher have freedom to instill values, approaches, and additional content beyond what is described by the course plan with its objectives and competencies to be evaluated. The context of professionalizing higher education in circus can (and did) potentially offer me as a teacher the freedom to be myself in my job, and as such, I shared my own values through teaching: a curriculum which was present, but hidden to me, until I could identify it. I believe all teachers hold their own HC within the objectives and functioning of the explicit curriculum.

In their research, Orón Semper & Blasco (2018) review philosophical approaches to HC dating from the 60s (as approaches to teaching shifted from teacher-centered values to a student learning centered focus), in order to define HC, its presence and influence in contemporary

higher education (HE). While their review refers to academic higher education, these ideas align with higher education in circus.

> Although the role of the teacher has ostensibly changed significantly, from that of an instructor (teacher-centered education) to that of a facilitator (student-centered education), s/he remains a marginal figure in the learning encounter (Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018, p. 495)

Student-centered education can leave circus teachers feeling on the fringes of the educational experience. Much writing on experiential learning focuses solely on the experience of the learner, (experiences which are ends-oriented and seek to produce demonstrable mastery of competences) and not on how the teacher is also transformed by the experience of exchange in teaching and learning. Orón Semper & Blasco articulate another vision of pedagogy in higher education, specific to adult, individualized, self-directed learning, the hidden curriculum has no place, and should be revealed when recognized. They argue that Hidden Curricula result from the separations of teacher's personhood from their teaching. Teachers have a responsibility to be fully themselves in their practice, and make any hidden curriculum known to students. Identifying unsaid assumptions in teaching, and making them evident to learners, can be a tool for their own pedagogical transformation.

> Learning is transmitted via the very specific and personal relationship between teachers and students…. learning is not only a product of teachers' and students' doing but also of their being; and that learning outcomes are the result of unique encounters between a teacher's being and a student's being that produce unpredictable effects—and therefore resist confinement to predefined learning goals. (Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018, p. 483)

The work of a circus disciplinary teacher and student produces unpredictable effects often and delightfully– magical moments of understanding or unexpected creativity. Circus teachers and students in higher education have the privilege of working in individualized contexts, wherein we can reciprocally teach and learn with one another. In the individual pedagogical relationships we are able to create with learners because of our personalized programs and extremely low teacher-student ratios, we have a freedom to bring our whole selves to our practice.

Sustainability as a Concept informed by Self-Determination Theory

> That most people show considerable effort, agency, and commitment in their lives appears, in fact, to be more normative than exceptional, suggesting some very positive and persistent features of human nature. (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68)

As a concept, I define professional sustainability the circus artist's ability to identify the multiple demands of the changing working environment and themselves and to meet them with personal and professional resources available; their capacity to continue the exploration and expression of circus over time. Within this adaptive balance, the circus artist's continued sense of engagement and holistic well-being supports their career longevity.

Through this research, I sought to understand the possibility of fostering long-term professional engagement in future circus artists through my work as a teacher of circus disciplinary classes in a vocational program designed to promote successful rapid employment in the field. Professional sustainability referred to developing and continuing a career as a circus artist, different to getting work (a short-term objective).

The Intersection of Health, Happiness and Productivity over Time

Professional sustainability as a concept has been studied by career management theorists for many years. De Vos, Van der Heijden and Akkermans (2020) indicate that sustainable career study must be systemic in nature, for the individuals who work are influenced not only by the possibilities and limitations of their work contexts, but also by their connections to family, employers, educators, and peers. Indicators of sustainability in De Vos' framework are health (mental and physical wellness), happiness (career satisfaction based on value alignment over time) and productivity (positive work performance based on skills and competencies that necessarily change over time as work contexts evolve). In professional sustainability, health and happiness connect to personal well-being, while productivity relates to work performance, all over time. Time is key to understanding sustainability as different from employability, for in the long term, "the *dynamic* fit, that is, the capacity to adapt and change according to changing needs" (p. 5) of a person and their chosen career will determine that person's capacity for enduring professional engagement. Career sustainability, or non-sustainability, will be determined by the adaptive interactions of the person, the context, and time.

Circus higher education in Québec seems to emphasize the preparation for productivity, given its curricular focus and emphasis on developing and evaluating professional competencies (Québec Province & Arendasova, D., 2004). The professionalizing programs clearly do this extremely well as evidenced by a cited a 95% graduate employment rate in the case of the ENC (Langlois, 2015, Rantisi & Leslie, 2018, École nationale de cirque, 2023) and a "nearly 100%" graduate employment rate in the case of the École de cirque de Québec (Lévêque, 2025). No context is given for these percentages, but it is suggested that these figures reflect short-term work rapidly following graduation. As intermediaries of the professional circus economy

(Rantisi & Leslie, 2015) higher education programs in Québec actively work to inform students of the changing current needs and vision of the professional milieu during their course of study.

On Adaptation

The pedagogical culture of professionalizing circus programs in Québec thus align behind "the value and purpose of vocational content" (Funk, 2017, p. 104), emphasizing the competency-based preparation of graduates for initial productivity in the field. Funk's later research on the interaction of curriculum and in creativity within circus higher education in Sweden demonstrates that tools to support adaptability within the profession can be taught through engagement with creative process.

> Learning the creative process within a domain enables students to engage with field-relevant problem-finding and problem-solving activities. It is therefore beneficial for the development of a field that students learn the creative process within it. It is also beneficial for learning the creative process to situate the practice within a field of expertise. These participants demonstrated that they used creative process approaches to domains beyond their specialty…(Funk, 2024, p. 290)

Funk demonstrated that circus higher education students could potentially learn how to find problems, solve problems, and adapt to failures with support through their experiences of circus curriculum, thus discovering a personalized process they will use as professionals. This *applied circus creativity* is key to supporting sustainability in within circus artists' careers, given the multiplicity of working contexts in which they will work, the limitations of resources within those contexts, and thus the creative knowledge adaptation that continued circus work requires.

Education researchers Gube & Lajoie identified *applied creative thinking* as a skill necessary to develop through all kinds of contemporary higher education, preparing graduates for a rapidly changing world in any knowledge domain. Applied creative thinking includes both adaptive expertise and creative thinking: "flexible, creative thinking that is based on fluid access to learned knowledge, and the adaptive application thereof" (Gube & Lajoie, 2020, p. 10).

The physical engagement and risk involved in performing circus, the variety of working conditions, and the relative instability of circus performance work all demand particular efforts by circus artists to both manage uncertainty and to find rapid solutions that ensure artists' capacity to perform. Often, the circus artists themselves propose these solutions. They regularly shape their movement vocabulary to a new dramaturgy or musical choice, propose choreographic possibilities within different contexts, or compose with unanticipated scenic limitations or performance-limiting injury. These adaptations require the use of circus artist's creativity, based in their circus "domain" knowledge (i.e. particularities of personalized vocabulary, audience satisfaction, spatial and safety constraints).

The generative process necessary for applied circus creativity, "the practice in circus of learning creative process within a specialized domain yet using the same creative process tools to navigate professional challenges adjacent to circus" (Funk, 2024, p.283), can be developed within the context of circus discipline classes (as well as in other curriculum contexts). During discipline classes, students engage in creative process in order to investigate, innovate or personalize movement, activities beyond mastering known physical vocabulary. Applied circus creativity contributes to professional sustainability for circus artists by supporting the dynamic adaptation necessary for career longevity. "…those with high levels of career adaptability show

more adaptivity (e.g., self-esteem), adapting (e.g., career planning) and adaptation (e.g., engagement, employability) in their careers" (De Vos et al., 2020, p. 8).

Balancing Demands and Resources

Management researchers Richardson and McKenna (2020) continued De Vos' work and examined the non-sustainability of professional sports careers for high-impact athletes (rugby). Sport has become professional work in a short-term career (that in the case of rugby lasts less than nine years on average).

The balance between demands of work and resources available to satisfy them is key for the sustainability of professional practice. Circus work demands consistent accurate physical performance, psychological readiness and presence, collaboration, and long-term preparedness, all of which may engender physical, mental and social costs. Resources available to meet these demands in circus can be material (access to training spaces and apparatus), social (peers and family available to share information or support), and psycho-social (access to specialist information and attention or additional training). If the cost of work outweighs the available resources, the sustainability of the circus artist is compromised (job loss, injury). Richardson and McKenna identify that intensive job demands, both physical and psychological, can also serve as a source of motivation for those who engage with work in sport. Resources provided by the work environment, such as available interpersonal coaching, physical training, nutrition, physical and mental support from experts, can also serve as motivators of continued engagement.

Beyond sport, "(a)n increasing number of jobs/careers are becoming unsustainable due to high employer and contextual demands, occupational stress, burnout and lack of work-life balance" (Richardson & McKenna, 2020, p 2). The resources needed to navigate professional demands in many contexts must be cultivated by the individual, when the work environment

does not provide them. In circus, professional network organizations such as *En Piste* work to provide essential additional resources in support of professional sustainability, but most circus artists, as independent contractors, work in contexts in which work demands must be balanced through resources managed by the individual.

De Vos, Van der Heijden and Akkermans also speak to resource management within sustainable careers as necessary for continuity and balanced growth. They highlight Social Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000), discussed later in this chapter, as providing a motivational framework for career sustainability, in its insistence on human persistence -- active behavior while working to satisfy autonomy, competence and relatedness over time. SDT holds that it is human nature to persist and to grow. Loss and change will be integral parts of any career path, and will require the use of recognized individual motivation: intrapersonal awarenesses as they connect to meaning, community and freedom to act. This proactive work can be facilitated by "a supportive environment that provides resources….and as such, support(s) activity, growth and psychological well-being" (De Vos et al., 2020, p. 5).

The work of balancing the equation of work demands with available resources necessitates both autonomy and relatedness. In this freedom to make decisions in line with their own interests, the circus artist decides what kind(s) of work to explore, how they will negotiate a contract, what actions they will take to promote their visibility and dynamic fit, as well as adapting to injury, job loss, or lack of funding. Professional choices are informed by a sense of meaning about what matters to the circus artist, as well as what is possible and necessary in any given context. Additionally, "…children, parents, and friends can affect individual's career sustainability through the support they provide to the person or the social influence they exert upon an individual's career decision-making" (De Vos et al., 2020, p. 8). It is through

interactions with others that circus artists will develop additional resources (personal and professional) in order to meet the changing demands of work.

Self-Determination Theory

As developed by psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) elucidates an understanding of human motivation and personality in our interactions with our environments (Deci & Ryan 1985, 2000, 2013).

Ryan and Deci purport that human beings are naturally curious and engaged: we want to learn, we want to master, we want to create and to explore (Deci & Ryan, 2013). This intrinsic motivation is supported in social contexts where we experience manageable challenges with which we can engage of our own volition, and receive meaningful feedback related to our developing skills (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Our passivity and disengagement are behaviorally maladaptive consequences of living, working, and learning in environments that do not support, or that impede our fundamental human needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness essential for our intrinsic motivation to thrive (Deci & Flaste, 1995).

> …research revealed that not only tangible rewards but also threats, deadlines, directives, pressured evaluations, and imposed goals diminish intrinsic motivation because, like tangible rewards, they conduce toward an external perceived locus of causality. In contrast, choice, acknowledgment of feelings, and opportunities for self-direction were found to enhance intrinsic motivation because they allow people a greater feeling of autonomy. (Ryan & Deci 2000, p. 70).

This articulation of what activities lessen intrinsic motivation, and what can support it, offers rich information for those who are involved in performance-oriented activities within art, sport and education.

Intrinsic motivation, the most constant and reliable form of motivation, requires not only our perception of our competency in facing a task, but also of our freedom to choose to engage with it, all the while we hold a sense of secure connection to others. (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000, 2013, Deci & Flaste, 1995, Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). When we choose to do something for its own sake, we are buoyed by our own experience of a sense of usefulness, of meaningfulness, and-or of enjoyment and satisfaction in the simple doing of it. Those identified anchors regulate our inherent motivation to continue. Intrinsic motivation supports persistence in the practice of an activity.

As humans, we constantly navigate requirements, needs and demands outside of ourselves as motivations for our actions. A lot of "adult" behaviors through the have-tos and shoulds of life entail doing things not for their own sake, but for achieving or satisfying separate associated outcomes. The long-term work of growth, change, and improvement of competence often involves dealing with external motivations: situations that exist outside of our natural inclinations or inherent interests.

Deci & Ryan (1985, 2000) investigated how people are able to regulate their responses to satisfying requirements that are not intrinsically motivated. They articulated that extrinsic demands can become *integrated* into our sense of intrinsic motivations when we identify and then fully accept them as aligning with our sense of meaning, or usefulness. *Identified regulation* implies the conscious acceptance of an external requirement as important and aligned with our own values. When we motivate our actions through a contingent sense of self-esteem in

order to satisfy external demands, this *introjected regulation* is "a relatively controlled form of regulation in which behaviors are performed to avoid guilt or anxiety or to attain ego enhancements such as pride" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 72). An *external regulation* does not accept an external demand as our own, but motivation comes from a need for compliance or the promise of reward.

> …it is through internalization and integration that individuals can be extrinsically motivated and still be committed and authentic. Accumulated research now suggests that the commitment and authenticity reflected in intrinsic motivation and integrated extrinsic motivation are most likely to be evident when individuals experience supports for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 74)

The work in part of teachers, parents, supervisors, coaches, friends becomes the offer and discovery of support for autonomy, competence and relatedness, to others and to ourselves.

SDT and Teaching

SDT has been examined often in varying contexts of education. Researchers determined that teachers have a natural, personality inclination towards control (directing learning activities or the environment towards specific outcomes) or towards autonomy (offering information and the possibility of choice within meaningful feedback) (Deci et al., 1982, Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Students working with identified control-oriented teachers demonstrated lowered self-esteem and intrinsic motivation, as compared with students who worked with autonomy-oriented teachers (Deci et al., 1982). A loss of personal motivation has a negative effect on student achievement.

> When autonomous motivation (whether intrinsic or integrated) is undermined, there are well-documented costs in terms of performance, especially when it requires flexible, heuristic, creative, or complex capacities. (Ryan & Deci, 2006, p. 1564)

Circus discipline training seeks to develop creative, problem-solving, as well as physical capacities that will encourage discovery of new pathways or possibilities in movement for individual students. Teachers offering choice within feedback will better support, and not diminish, students' personal motivation.

Educational situations also affected teachers' personal tendency to support autonomy. When teachers were told they were responsible for students' performing up to standards, their experience of this pressure caused them to teach in a more controlling manner; explaining more, directing more, offering more negative feedback and less choice, thus affecting students' intrinsic motivation and self-esteem.

> When people are pressured to make others perform, they themselves tend to become more controlling. That in turn has negative consequences for the self-determination of the people they relate to. (Deci & Ryan, 1987, p. 1030)

However, Deci and Ryan articulated that teachers' having *standards* did not have to imply their control orientation, for it is possible to communicate those standards informationally (through feedback directed towards developing competence, supported by choice), instead of through control.

> "…performance standards may not be inherently antagonistic to intrinsic motivation (of teachers and students), although when teachers or students experience them as pressure,

> they are likely to have the effect that was found in this study." (Deci & Ryan, 1982, p. 858)

SDT suggests that the work of teachers involved in evaluative processes, remains to communicate informationally, through meaningful, actionable, task-related feedback in support of student learning. All members of an educational community will most likely need to work on how they receive communication, in order to hear informational feedback as it is offered.

> …both teachers' orientations and specific aspects of learning tasks that are perceived as autonomy supportive are conducive to students' intrinsic motivation, whereas controlling educational climates undermine intrinsic motivation. Second, students tend to learn better and are more creative when intrinsically motivated, particularly on tasks requiring conceptual understanding. Third, the way in which teachers introduce learning tasks impacts students' satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy and competence, thereby either allowing intrinsic motivation to flourish and deeper learning to occur, or thwarting those processes. (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009, p.136)

Circus teachers may have a natural orientation towards control or autonomy support, but they can learn to be aware of how their actions can support students' intrinsic motivation. There is a natural tendency to assume that students are highly motivated for their discipline class, but it could be useful to examine what are the sources of student motivation? Is it fun? Is it meaningful? Is it useful? Teachers who offer students choice and possibility in learning reinforce the autonomy of those students, permitting them to actively engage with the learning process and develop integrated or intrinsic motivations towards their learning. The way information or activities are brought to life in the classroom will influence students' long-term success.

SDT and Sports Coaching:

The working relationship between teachers and students in circus higher education is a limited subject of discussion in circus education literature. I turned to literature on coaches and athletes to look at potential impacts and possibilities as they relate to professional sustainability.

> Although many factors may impact athletes' intrinsic and self-determined extrinsic motivation, the coach–athlete relationship is one of the most important influences on athletes' motivation and subsequent performance. (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003, p. 884)

Over the last twenty years, high performance coaching research has investigated Self-Determination Theory in examining coaching behaviors as they relate to autonomy and feedback. Athletes' performance and persistence benefit from coaches' autonomy-supportive behaviors. Coaches can provide opportunities for athletes' self-determination while also being actively involved and providing structure, thus facilitating athletes' intrinsic and integrated motivations. (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). The presence of structure in training, whether in circus or in sport, is essential for the well-being of students and athletes. In the case of circus, most students are motivated to work towards goals, towards the development of creative ideas, towards sharing their work in performance.

Autonomy-supportive coaching behaviors, such as including athletes in decision-making, recognizing their own and athletes' feelings, and explaining reasons for demands or limits in a structured training environment, positively affect the subjective well-being and performance of athletes (Mageau & Vallerand 2003; Smith et al., 2017; Lemelin et al., 2022). By fostering relatedness in recognizing athletes with whom they work as distinct individuals and acknowledging their feelings with interest, coaches support athlete autonomy, "the universal desire to feel that one is at the center of one's actions, and that one's actions are concordant with

one's desires" (Carpentier & Mageau, 2013, p. 424). In the process of training, playing, learning their sport, athletes can optimize their sources of intrinsic or integrated motivation to sustain their work and perform better (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

Context will have an effect on the behaviors of coaches and athletes, and can affect their relationship and performance. "when the immediate context (1) pressures people to perform or (2) creates high levels of stress, people are more likely to emit controlling behaviors." (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003, p. 895). In the context of evaluated, graded performances in circus higher education, stakeholders need to be conscious of their own internalized pressures to perform, and the tendency towards unhelpful direction or judgement that internalized pressure can evoke. Learning to articulate needs, possibilities and choices may offer an easier pathway during an acceptably stressful moment.

In a discussion of past Olympic performances, it was noted that when coaches as well as athletes have their fundamental needs met, their performance improves as well (Forest, Carpentier & Richard, 2020). In the tendency of educational and sport literature to speak of student-centered or athlete-centered environments, it is important to remember that teachers are also engaged in long-term, perhaps even sustainable careers. Circus teachers who are aware of their own sources of motivation, or who actively work towards satisfying their need for autonomy competence and relatedness, will have more fun in their work, and may even become better teachers.

> The more psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) are satisfied, regardless of the source of satisfaction, the more pleasure and meaning are experienced on a daily basis, which in turn contributes to performance and well-being. (Forest, Carpentier & Richard, 2020, p.31, my translation)

Coaches' behavior through promotion-oriented or change-oriented feedback is crucial to the development of an athlete's sense of competence. (Carpentier & Mageau, 2013). Change-oriented feedback offers coaches the opportunity to motivate and to guide an athlete to improve performance, but has the potential to negatively impact athlete's performance, self-esteem, and motivation depending on its content and presentation. Carpentier & Mageau determined that it was indeed possible to offer autonomy supportive, *change-oriented* feedback, and that such feedback improved not only performance but also well-being and self-esteem. The quality of change-oriented feedback offered by coaches has an effect on performance.

> It thus appears that providing change-oriented feedback that is empathic, paired with tips and choices of solutions, given in a considerate tone of voice, and that avoids person-related statements as well as being based on clear and attainable objectives known to athletes, represents an additional behavior in autonomy-supportive coaches' behavioral repertoire. (Carpentier & Mageau, 2013, p. 432)

This framework for autonomy-supportive feedback can protect and build upon a relationship of trust between circus discipline teachers and students. In circus training, the body, the person of the student is implicated at every level of the work. How teachers and students work through improving performance is essential. Students (and teachers both) will make mistakes, for it is impossible to learn without making them. Circus discipline teachers are there to ensure safety and to offer guidance from their knowledge, expertise and perspectives. That guidance can be offered in a way that empowers students to make their own choices, and to continue to engage with the process of learning, exploring, creating and mastering offered by the experience of circus discipline class.

Awareness of what we do as teachers in professionalizing circus higher education, as well as how we do it, can significantly affect student experiences as well as performance. Recent research demonstrating the use of SDT and humanistic approaches to coaching in sports contexts demonstrate that autonomy-supportive, learner-centered styles positively affect not only subjective well-being, but also improve performance, benefiting athlete's motivation to continue. If SDT can improve performance in sport, it most probably can improve the complex outcomes of circus performance in vocational higher education.

Summary

Through this chapter, I have presented a literature review, an articulation of the research site of circus discipline teaching at the ENC, and a conceptual framework of professional sustainability that will be investigated through the experiences of graduates of the ENC through this research.

The literature has used circus history to examine the similar but different developments of the higher education programs at the CNAC and the ENC. The *École nationale de cirque* in Montréal, like every professionalizing higher education circus school, has its own particular institutional and pedagogical culture that has evolved because of the interaction of its history with the professional circus milieu. It both shapes and is shaped by the local professional context of circus arts. The particularities of the entrepreneurial culture surrounding performance arts in North America have influenced the evolution of the Russian Model in higher education here: reinforcing the primacy of the circus act as a tool for creation, composition, evaluation and introduction of graduating students to the professional milieu, central to the work of the disciplinary circus teacher.

A review of other research related to teaching, learning and curriculum located at the ENC, revealed multiple interpretations of currents of thought present in circus teaching at the

school, as well as shifts from teacher-centered to student-centered environments. Cognitive behaviorist, socio-constructivist, humanist…the presence of these educational philosophies can be observed through the interactions of students, teachers and curriculum. I believe my teaching practice at the ENC aligned best with a humanist perspective.

Humanism has been shown to be pertinent when applied to sports coaching contexts, though it can be interpreted to be in opposition to traditional coach-centered, behaviorist thinking. I identified my hidden curriculum as a circus disciplinary teacher, connecting it to professional sustainability. I hoped, through circus teaching and learning, to contribute to setting the groundwork for students' long-term, balanced professional development as circus artists, even within the context of a vocational circus program.

Management research locates the concept of sustainability at the intersection of health, happiness and productivity. In professional sustainability, health and happiness connect to personal well-being, while productivity relates to work performance, all over time. Time is key to understanding sustainability as different from employability. Applied circus creativity, born of circus domain knowledge applied to other domains is used in adaptability that is necessary for sustainability in a circus career. Autonomy, competence and relatedness are essential elements of career sustainability, necessary for balancing demands with available resources, and for cultivating additional resources. Teachers can have a natural inclination to be more controlling or more autonomy-supportive, but all can learn how to engage in teaching that supports autonomy. When teachers feel they are responsible for the success of learning or performance outcomes, they become more controlling in their behaviors. Intrinsic motivation is key for career sustainability. Informational, autonomy-supportive change-oriented feedback has been shown to improved outcomes in athletic performance and athletes' subjective well-being.

Understanding the history of circus schools, and the cultural context of the ENC enabled me to grasp how I had gotten here, as a circus teacher concerned with long-term professional practice. In order to learn more about what could support professional sustainability, I needed to speak with professional circus artists.

Chapter III: Research Methodology

T'aint what you do, it's the way that you do it…that's what gets results.

Ella Fitzgerald, after Sy Oliver and Trummy Young

In contrast to Ella Fitzgerald's swinging assertion, the development of a research methodology demonstrates that both *what* we do in studying an identified problem, and *how* we approach those research activities create a pathway to achieve results.

Through this research, I sought to develop an understanding of professional sustainability through the lived experiences of circus artists, graduates of the ENC, in dialogue with my own as one of their former circus discipline teachers, once a member of the pedagogical culture there. Intrinsic motivation and autonomy as articulated in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) support the persistence of human engagement in an activity. I sought to experience the memories of autonomy-support within circus discipline classes held by these former students, in the hopes of better understanding my own teaching practice, and transforming it in the future.

Research Design

This research is qualitative and interpretive in nature. Following the principles described by educational research methodologist Savoie-Zajc (2018), it anchors within an educational research problem that demonstrates the lived complexity of interactions between circus artists, the professional milieu in circus, circus teachers, and pedagogical cultures that prepare students for professional work. The research explores the problem of how to understand the nature of longevity in circus arts and prepare a future circus artist for a sustainable career through the work within a circus discipline class. That problem is explored through the dialogical relationship between teacher and student, now working together as researcher and participant. The site of

our pedagogical exchange was relational during their education at the ENC. The site of this continuation of our exchange is relational during this research. As Savoie-Zajc (2018) relates,

> An educator is that person who succeeds in establishing connections with the learner that are both meaningful and shared. How can we study a real interactive context, other than by maintaining its essence, and interaction?" (p. 193, my translation)

The data (or field texts) gathered in this research is qualitative, coming from transcripts of interviews, as well as my field notes taken during the interview process, and personal memos. This data exists in words that relate lived experiences of the thirteen research participants as professionals and as students. Once these individual experiences were collected together, the words were studied in order to gain a sense of their meaning. In this, my approach to this interpretive research is phenomenological, for I hope to better understand the lived experiences of professional sustainability in circus arts related to me by the participants through finding common threads of shared meaning in their responses (Savoie-Zajc, 2018).

As a researcher, I do not seek to discover an objective truth about the phenomena of learning professional sustainability in circus, but to describe the experiences of professional circus artists in relation to career sustainability and discipline study, and how they interpret those experiences. The responses of the research participants to my interview questions are subjective, even if objectively they have all experienced not only the phenomena of sustainability, but also of circus discipline class with me. This research accepts an interdependence of subject and object. In other words, our perceptions of something shape what it is. The perceptions of the research participants of the phenomena of sustainability, their inherent subjectivity, shapes how they have understood sustainability and how they have known it. "The reality of an object," in

this case, professional sustainability, "is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of the individual" (Creswell, 2013, p. 78).

Additionally, I interpret experiences of others through the qualitative data, experiences that have already been interpreted by those who lived them, for they are transformed in their very telling. Phenomenological and pedagogical philosopher Van Manen reminds us

> All recollections of experiences, reflections on experiences, descriptions of experiences, taped interviews about experiences, or transcribed conversations about experiences are already transformations of those experiences. Even life captured directly on magnetic or light-sensitive tape is already transformed at the moment it is captured. (1997, p. 54)

Understanding of long-term career development in circus, and autonomy-support within the circus discipline class we shared is recognized as subjective, co-created by the participants, the researcher, and those who later engage with the study.

This research makes evident my interpretations of teaching circus in higher education, articulating my intention to support the development of autonomy through how I worked with students in a physical circus discipline class driven by skills mastery, movement research and composition processes. The experiences of former students with whom I worked were essential to developing my understanding. If, as I understand it, students are at the center of the circus higher education environment; if teaching and learning in this context happens in dialogue, I could not come to understand the way circus teaching and learning happened without continuing this dialogue through the research process. The meaningful exchanges through semi-directed individual interviews continued the generative process of our collaborative work as teachers and

students in circus. We worked as co-creators of meaning in our work in class, and in this qualitative research.

Participant Selection.

In the context of my teaching in the DEC-DEE program at the ENC, the number of students with whom I worked in a disciplinary class varied from year to year, depending on the schedule and students that were assigned to me. I hoped to interview ten graduates, seeking to have one representing almost each year of graduation spanning from 2011-2021. In that way, I sought to have participants who would have a variety of circus career longevity post-graduation. I did not seek to screen for current employment as circus artists, because the research focused on understandings of professional sustainability, as well as experiences of work in class together. I hoped to have a representation of graduates with whom I had worked in a variety of discipline class contexts at the ENC.

My research centered on work within the context of circus discipline class, which in my case were most often aerial disciplines such as rope, dance trapeze, duo trapeze and *tissu*.

The initial field of candidates was relatively small, and I was uncertain of how many graduates would respond. I was able to reach out to all ENC 2011-2021 graduates with whom I had worked as a circus discipline teacher initially by Messenger, to introduce my research project and to determine their interest in participating in an interview with me via Zoom as a part of this research (Appendix A). Communication by Messenger was more readily visible and immediately accessible to the potential participants at this initial stage.

Circus artists work and live around the world, and I did not know how to anticipate availability or interest for this kind of study. In the 2009 FEDEC study of professional

competencies of circus artists, researcher Herman noted the difficulty of connecting with circus professionals with international careers, and used on-line surveys to facilitate access. Fifteen years later and post-pandemic, videoconferencing has made international one-on-one communication easier, but many circus artists do not regularly check their emails, preferring other communication platforms. Of those 36 initial contacts, I received 21 expressions of interest by Messenger; graduates who then sent me their personal email addresses, so that I might use those addresses for future contact from my Concordia graduate student e-mail address.

Of those 21 interested parties, 13 were available to speak with me during the planned two-week interview period. I decided to conduct interviews with all thirteen participants in order to ensure that I would have enough participation in case any interviewed parties decided to withdraw after or during the interview process. A potentially limiting requirement of their participation was their acceptance of my recording of the ZOOM video-interaction interview, so that I might later transcribe the conversation for analysis. Those thirteen participants received an Information and Consent Form by email, as a further, more detailed introduction to the project, and I received signed consent forms from all thirteen participants. (Appendix B)

In this way, selection criteria were met without the use of a survey. Those persons who were interested and available represented my initial desire for professionals having graduating from at least ten out of the eleven cohorts between 2011 and 2021, and from a variety of teaching contexts within circus discipline classes. Additionally, they represented four different nationalities, as the ENC attracts talent worldwide through the recognition of its DEC-DEE program beyond local or national repute. The interviews were conducted in English, though participants spoke multiple languages. Their educational experiences with me had taken place in French or in English, depending on their maternal language and our class context. All research

participants had attested to their comfort in communicating in English for these interviews, for non-native English speakers had been living and working in English for years. Specific information relating to participants' ages, gender, year of graduation, citizenship, discipline studied, teaching-learning context with me or other potentially identifying information will not be shared in this thesis, because such specific information would facilitate their identification as participants.

Ethical Considerations

This research did not present a conflict of interest, as I was no longer in the role of teacher with the participants, responsible for their grades or other evaluations. As a member of the professional community in Montreal, working often as a coach or choreographer with various professional projects, I am not involved in casting decisions. Participation in this research project presented no direct advantage to participants in terms of a gain of employment or material advantage.

The protection of their identities was a principal concern, as previously mentioned, due to the small and specific pool of participants, and their generously open sharing of both educational, professional and personal experiences.

A Changed Plan

The original research plan intended to collect qualitative data through two different activities: semi-directed interviews with 2011-2021 graduates of the DEC-DEE program, with whom I had worked as a circus discipline teacher in their primary or complementary discipline; as well as active self-observation of my own teaching practice with two adult individual students enrolled in circus discipline class with me at the ENC at that time.

My research plan was reviewed by Concordia's Ethics Committee and by the Ethics Committee of CRITAC (*Centre de recherche, d'innovation et de transfert en arts du cirque* or the Center for research, innovation and transfer in circus arts), which oversaw all research taking place at the ENC as a part of its mandate. I informed the Director of Studies of the ENC, James Tanabe, of my planned self-reflexive research project, and he completed a Letter of Acknowledgement of the entirety of the project, confirming acceptance. I was unable to obtain the ethics approval of CRITAC in time for my pursuit of the second aspect of my research in the context of self-observation of practice in actual classwork at the ENC.

My research plan then adapted to continue with the planned graduate semi-directed interview process. In the original plan, I had intended to research both professional experiences of the learning environment, and my present actions within that environment. The adjustment of the research project to entail only semi-directed interviews with graduates was accepted by Concordia's Ethics Committee and through the Letter of Acknowledgement from the ENC.

Field Text Collection

Thirteen 2011-2021 graduates of the ENC with whom I worked as a circus disciplinary teacher during their studies participated in 60-75-minute individual, semi-directed interviews with me via ZOOM, from the safe and private location of my home. The interviews were both video and audio recorded for later transcription and analysis through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

These interviews are the primary field texts of this study. I refer to them as field texts to signify that the information shared and documented through those conversations is constructed in its meaning and significance. "What a researcher focuses on during observations or the kinds of

questions asked during interviews, are all ultimately selective and contribute to this construction." (Butler-Kisber, 2018, p. 25)

Prior to constructing the framework of interview questions, I examined my own experiential memories of shifting pedagogical perspectives as a circus teacher within the context of the ENC. I wrote down specific memories of events in teacher training or continuing education events. I wrote of a few significant memories of moments of insight in my teaching work in class with students, specifically relating to autonomy support and creative process after looking through my teaching notebooks through this period, and wrote them in as personal memos to myself. I used these almost storied snapshots to articulate shifts in my thinking around teaching, reflexivity, insider-outsider in a culture, autonomy support and sustainability during the pandemic. An example is offered in Appendix D.

This research focuses on the lived experiences of graduates. It does not deliver a hypothesis or a causality as a research result, but a reflection on the meaning given to the experiences of circus artists, a pattern of shared experiences after analysis. The purpose of the interview was to develop a sense of the graduate's experience of sustainability and their experience of autonomy-support in circus discipline class by asking about it directly, and also indirectly, repeatedly. Within their stories of their work since graduation were often anecdotes about meaningful experiences, challenges, and successes.

I recognize myself as a co-creator of meaning in this qualitative-interpretative research, but my intention was not to study my own experiences of the phenomena explored. In a phenomenological study, the researcher can work to

> "bracket(s) himself or herself out of the study by discussing personal experiences with the phenomenon. This does not take the researcher completely out of the study, but it does serve to identify personal experiences with the phenomenon and to partly set them aside so that the researcher can focus on the experiences of the participants." (Creswell, 2013, p. 78)

I did not write any bracketing memos specifically on the subject of my experiences of career longevity, but I have done work to know myself as a researcher, to acknowledge my subjectivity, and to make it evident to any who interact with this research. In Chapter One, I have offered biographical and experiential information to identify my positionality as a researcher, an enduring member of a a pedagogical culture. The example snapshot memo in Appendix D is offered as an example of a kind of text that worked to respond in part to my (and David Byrne's) question of "How did I get here?" This snapshot memo text was not directly included as a data source to be analyzed, but served as a means for me to find my way to my hidden curriculum and a sense of purpose in this research. The ensuing examination of existing research on professional sustainability and its connection to SDT and applied circus creativity allowed me to better understand the concept of professional sustainability as it related to a career as a circus artist.

The framework of semi-directed interview questions sought to evoke participant interaction by being open-ended. I defined and selected questions, connecting to the intersection of ideas I had located in the work of Gube & Lajoie (2020) on supportive teacher behaviors for creativity, as well as sports psychologists Mageau & Vallerand (2003)'s list of autonomy-supportive behaviors for coaches. In this sense, the conceptual framework of professional sustainability in circus informed the interview questions. I was able invite circus artists to share their experiences of autonomy support and the practice of adapting domain knowledge through

creative practice, without asking about or naming those subjects. The participants related their experiences of choice, of inclusion, of initiative-taking, open-ended exploration, of the quality of feedback, through the stories they shared.

I hoped to facilitate ease and openness in responses even in the context of the videocall interview. The questions began with an opportunity for them to define themselves as professionals, evoking how they saw themselves and their work as circus artists, and then to relate the history of their work in circus. Talking about those professional experiences re-established our connection, and brought me into their sense of their past since our work together, re-grounding our collaboration the present shared moment. Questions began in their professional present, then moved to their experiences as students. There was space in the interview for them to ask questions of me, some of which catalyzed my understandings. Utilizing the same framework of questions, I was able to maintain a certain continuity across all of the interviews, even with the variety of responses and interactions. (Savoie-Zajc, 2018) The interview question framework I used can be found in Appendix C.

The direct question about professional sustainability took some artists by surprise. Switching the focus to their experiences of the learning environment we shared, I asked questions that enabled them to share their memories surrounding choice, structure, evaluative processes, and creative ones. Their body language, laughter, questions, stories, all gave me information related to their experience of the learning environment. At the end of the interview, I brought back two questions referring to sustainability. I asked what they thought might be done to support the development of sustainability, which enabled ideas they had begun to explore earlier in the conversation solidify or expand. I opened the interview to their perspectives in case I had not asked a question that had solicited a response they had wanted to

offer about sustainability, or about the work we had shared in class together. I am glad to have left this open opportunity for sharing, for the unsolicited stories and experiences shared at the end of the interview were rich with meaning.

After each interview, I wrote reflexive memos, quickly noting further questions, memories and reactions that each interaction evoked. After transcription of an interview, I wrote a very general familiarization note so I could remember some of the content of responses. I continued to take notes on my reactions during the process of reflexive thematic analysis of the interview texts. This journaling helped me to find landmarks in my understanding during the research. These texts can also be considered as field texts, having shaped my developing understanding of the experiences of the participants, and allowing me space to reflect.

> "A researcher is able to define critical moments, to understand messages that might have been subtly communicated, because of the distance journal-writing creates. It allows the theoretical and conceptual influences that have lived in the researcher throughout the research process to surface: from its initial planning to the interpretation of results." (Savoie-Zacs, 2018, p. 214)

I continued this personal journaling process during the analysis of the interview field texts as a means of reflection on the meanings I was assigning to codes and themes, and the reactions I was having to the process.

Field Text Organization, Management and Analysis

Recorded video and audio from the ZOOM interviews were first uploaded to my computer, and then saved to a separate, encrypted hard drive kept in a secure location. Personal notes and memos, any texts related to my research journal, were also saved to the encrypted hard

drive. Each participant was assigned a letter and number pseudonym. All materials related to that particular interview were saved under that pseudonym.

As an additional form of anonymization, I assigned a number to each participant voice cited in the thesis, calling them Participant 1- Participant 13. Any potentially identifying information from the conversations (particular work experience, names, and references) have been removed in the passages cited in this thesis.

Though the interviews themselves were concentrated over two weeks in the winter of 2023, I enacted my transcription, and then research process part-time over two years. The first draft of transcription occurred while watching and listening to the video. A second draft enabled me to correct mis-understood words, adding notes of meaning-conveying gestures, pauses, stresses and intonation. I then listened to the audio .mp3 of the conversation again, following along with, and further correcting and noting the transcription of the interview. I re-listened and read the full transcriptions again during the research process. Once completed, the transcribed interviews were saved to the secured, encrypted hard drive, in the files attributed to the pseudonym used for each participant. I shared an example of a transcription with my supervisor for his review and confirmation.

Completing the process of transcription in a piecemeal manner, distanced from the moment of interview is not best practice (Butler-Kisber, 2018), and added to my feelings of uncertainty around the action of transcribing and then of reflexive thematic analysis. Yet repeated contact with the sources and the texts themselves, diving in multiple times, starting over again when IT mistakes occurred allowed me to know their content more deeply. Reading and re-reading, along with listening and re-listening as I immersed myself in re-connection with the

interviews brought me to savor the conversations, to treasure the opportunity this research gave me to have contact with the participants again, and to know them differently.

My analysis began during the process of transcription (Butler-Kisber, 2018, Braun & Clarke, 2019), as I familiarized myself with the words and themes that continued to reappear. My notes immediately following the interviews contained many of these concepts, such as "limits," "choice," "fun," "variety." These basic labels served to give me a general sense of repeated subjects that appeared in conversation, without attaching them to a sense of meaning.

In these early moments of the process of thematic analysis of the conversations, I began with a blocked color-code highlighting of codes in the transcript texts using MS Word, adding small text notes to myself as reminders in the margins. In this example, colors codes related to of "balance,"" knowing limits" and "multiple experiences." My notes commented on "accumulation of experience -- Financial sustainability important."

The problem with this method was that I could not work in the detail I had hoped, and it was hard to have a sense of multiple interconnecting ideas across interviews. I had colorful texts but was unable to indicate that some phrases related to multiple codes. I could visualize repetition, but not interconnection. I was unsatisfied with the too-large generalizations that my initial attempts at coding multiple texts had produced.

After a hiatus from the analysis, I changed my approach to the initial analysis process. I researched and then utilized a simple application called Delve Tool, which enabled me to organize and re-organize codes and themes I identified in each interview in a more dynamic manner. It made it much easier to change definitions of codes or their names. The tool, while limited, organized lists of codes and themes across the field texts in one location that could be

downloaded as a .pdf. I did all of the naming, writing, identifying, defining, and determining of the codes and themes. The edited transcripts were uploaded into the tool. Once the coding was completed, I downloaded the coded transcripts in .pdf form and saved them to the encrypted external hard drive.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

I utilized reflexive thematic analysis, developed by psychologists Braun & Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021) as a means of developing codes and themes from the field texts as they related to the research questions. Reflexive thematic analysis seemed appropriate as this research does not fit in the positivist tradition – it does not seek to discover governing laws or an objective truth about teaching and learning in circus in higher education, but rather, to interpret and relate experiences and constructed understandings. It embraces and acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher as essential for constructing knowledge from the data, which makes sense given my insider status and continuing connection to the graduates who were participants in this work. This requires a framework that is both flexible and rigorous.

> For us, qualitative research is about meaning and meaning-making, and viewing these as always context-bound, positioned and situated, and qualitative data analysis is about telling 'stories', about interpreting, and creating, not discovering and finding the 'truth' that is either 'out there' and findable from, or buried deep within, the data. For us, the final analysis is the product of deep and prolonged data immersion, thoughtfulness and reflection, something that is active and generative. (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 591).

In this initial round of coding using the DelveTool, I began with semantic expression in codes, using simple words and occasional concepts with a phrase that repeated more superficial concepts of language within the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2021), and also some latent

expression, accessing deeper aspects of shared meaning (most likely because of my assumed understanding of common experiences as an insider researcher, with knowledge of each participant's process) (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

This is evidenced in changes in codes I assigned through the thirteen texts. The previously cited color blocked text was now coded differently: "Balance in work-life," "Connecting to Community," "Boundaries and the capacity to express them," "Financial," "Coping with outside demands." These latent codes (i.e. Connecting to Community) identified resonances beyond the words used by the speakers that formed patterns through the texts. I began to write memos on the meanings represented by these codes and my questions behind them when I looked at the passages from multiple texts I had coded.

I recognized the presence of the conceptual framework of professional sustainability within the steps of this reflexive thematic analysis. Within the early articulation of codes and themes through the field text analysis, I saw reflections of meaning that related to concepts within Social Determination Theory. The aforementioned description of the code related to Financial Sustainability contains elements that connect to relatedness, autonomy and an extrinsic motivation. In this sense, I qualify my thematic analysis as utilizing a "moderated inductive logic" (Savoie-Zajc, 2018, p. 207), as it moved from the specific and personal storied responses of circus artists, towards more generalized constructed meanings that were informed by the concept of professional sustainability and its connection to circus I had investigated.

In my reflexive memos during the process of thematic analysis, I note my own insecurity in this freedom to participate in the meaning-making as a researcher, to make decisions about what counted in the stories that were shared with me. Braun & Clarke (2019) insist "The researcher's role in knowledge is at the heart of our approach!" (p. 594) and yet I was not certain

of my correct use of analysis. I questioned if my seeing the patterns of information relating to autonomy, competence and relatedness in the field texts was a mis-use of the process. Anadón and Savoie-Zajc (2009) support that in a moderated inductive analysis, even the initial codes and categories used have roots in a concept that has defined the phenomenon that is being studied.

When I began to construct initial themes from the codes, the latent codes transformed somewhat naturally into more overarching themes. They seemed to have tapped into relations of meaning between the field texts than some of the more semantic codes. As an example, the initial semantic code of "knowing limits" had become "Boundaries and the capacity to express them." After reflection upon my researcher's interpretation of boundaries

> The word boundary doesn't seem right because in using it, it seems to bring up the interpersonal more than the context of work. Kind of psychobabbly and not about work environment or conditions. Being able to express limits or boundaries is about the work structures and understanding of roles and authority in working contexts, agency.
>
> Research Journal Notes, December 9, 2024

The ensuing theme then became "Expressing Limits and having the space to articulate them" which became "Holding and Expressing Limits" as an overarching theme in relation to the first research question, relating a part of the essence of professional sustainability for circus artists.

My notes within my field journal in the collection and progressive analysis of the field texts from the interviews served as means of noting my reflexive process in the development of themes and overarching themes from initial codes.

Credibility

Qualitative research demonstrates a credibility, instead of proving its validity as in quantitative research (Butler-Kisber, 2018). Credibility relates to "the believability of the meaning that has been assigned to the studied phenomena" (Savoie-Zajc, 2018, p. 208) through the research process and the interpretation of the researcher.

I have sought through the preceding chapters to make my position known (to readers and to myself) as an insider researcher, working as a part of the research site in the context of the ENC for fourteen years. My long-term engagement with this field, and this research problem, contributes to the credibility of my analysis.

Subjectivity in the participant and the researcher as they participate in meaning-making through analysis of shared experiences is acknowledged as part of both the phenomenological approach, as well as of reflexive thematic data analysis. Braun & Clarke (2019) purport that the development of themes is a creative act, not a reflection of reliable codes, but of the researcher's "reflexive and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process" (p. 594). Their analytical approach joins with the perspectives of Anadón & Savoie-Zajc (2009) who state that a qualitative researcher is called upon to use their creativity in their interpretation of the data presented by their research.

> …the process of interpretation requires the researcher to be more intuitive, inventive and able to make connections with theoretical concepts, to nuance and link results with what is already known about a given phenomenon. (p. 2, my translation)

My interpretation of the interconnections of the themes in response to the initial research questions reflected an alignment and important developments of the concept of professional

sustainability I had developed. My experiences as a teacher in circus higher education enabled me to recognize opportunities for transformation of my own teaching practice through the analysis of the field texts shared in the following chapter.

Chapter IV: Research Results and Discussion

First of all you need a good foundation
Otherwise it's risky from the start
Takes a lot of earnest conversation
But without the proper preparation
Having just the vision's no solution
Everything depends on execution
The art of making art
Is putting it together
Bit by bit Stephen Sondheim, *Putting It Together*

This chapter communicates meanings of the lived experiences of professional circus artists as they relate to career sustainability, and to the learning environment we shared during their circus discipline classes in a vocational higher education program in Québec.

Earnest conversations, semi-directed interviews between the thirteen participants and myself, resulted in themes that weave through the framework of the overarching research questions. These themes hold the stories of circus artists who have constructed careers, weathering challenges and celebrating moments. Bit by bit, they have built an international professional path from their foundational experiences in circus education, some of which we shared in the learning environment of circus discipline class together at the ENC.

Reflexive thematic analysis of their storied experiences resulted in overarching themes that responded to my initial questions, and connected to a conceptual framework of career sustainability for circus artists. That framework defined sustainability for circus artists as adaptively balancing the multiple demands of the changing work environment with the

professional and personal resources available to them in order to continue their healthy engagement with the field over time. This framework was supported by theory of career sustainability coming from management literature (De Vos et al., 2020). Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1982, 1987, 2000) and its principles relating to intrinsic motivation, autonomy, competence and relatedness, were necessary elements in systemically balancing the equation of work demands with available resources. Applied circus creativity (Funk, 2024) informed the capacity of circus artists to use processes and knowledge from circus to adapt to varied situations and problem-solve as professionals; for a particularity of circus is the variety of environments it offers and the relative instability of work.

What do graduates of a higher education circus program identify as necessary to support career sustainability following years of professional experience? How do their ideas intersect with my understanding of sustainability? The first question and sub-question enabled me to examine my understanding of my own hidden curriculum: values beyond the objectives named in articulated curriculum of the discipline circus course, my interpretation of the purpose that discipline study serves within professionalizing higher education in Québec.

How do they remember the learning environment we shared in disciplinary circus classes as it relates to the support of autonomy? The second question speaks to how the professionals remembered their experiences of the environment of our classes together within their professionalizing circus higher education. I knew from my early reflexive memos as a part of this research process that I had intended for learning activities to be autonomy-supportive.

I identified my hidden curriculum as transmitting value around professional sustainability, career longevity, within a vocational program in circus arts designed to facilitate rapid integration into the local and international professional milieu. Prior to the interviews, I

articulated my belief that autonomy-support through technical and creative circus discipline classes was essential in facilitating the development of circus artists who would have enduring careers, beyond initial work experiences.

If the learning environment "is, to a large extent, formed by the teacher," (Deci & Ryan, 1987, p. 858) this research would offer me important feedback regarding my teaching practice. I wanted to understand, from the perspective of former students, their experiences of persistence within the field: what they understood they needed in order to work as circus artists. I wanted to hear their memories of our shared space of class-work with regard to support of their autonomy while learning. As a teacher, I intended to support the growth of personal autonomy within circus discipline classes in higher education. I needed the perspectives of those who had engaged in class with me in order to have a better sense of how those intentions were realized, how they were received. I found the continuing dialogue of teaching and learning held transformational potential for my practice, putting it together to form a continuing perspective on my work.

Question 1: Professional Sustainability in Circus Arts

In response to the first question and sub-question,

- What do graduates of a higher education circus program identify as necessary to support career sustainability following years of professional experience?
    - How do their ideas intersect with my understanding of professional sustainability and what might support it?

I constructed three overarching themes through the reflexive thematic analysis: Integrated Self Knowledge: Building an Adaptive System, Holding and Expressing Limits, and Keeping

Balance through Connection. The first overarching theme (Integrated Self-Knowledge) held three sub-themes: Physical Knowledge and Mental Awareness; Knowing your Why, Capacity for Adaptation (which related to Self-Confidence). The analysis demonstrated meaningful connections between the three overarching themes.

The reflexive thematic analysis makes evident these graduates' vision of themselves as circus artists. They are whole, athletic, creative, performing people. Collectively, they speak of professional sustainability necessitating the development of awareness of self and milieu: knowledge of the particularities of which will enable them to adapt to, and to enjoy, professional challenges. Sustainability requires recognition that even with self-knowledge and autonomy, they will frequently confront working environments wherein they will not have agentic control. Adaptation is possible and necessary, thanks to their self-knowledge (associated with competency) and their ability to make choices (associated with autonomy). Knowing themselves as an adaptive system enables them to recognize their limits, and when necessary, to express those limits, to make decisions, or to seek out support, in order to keep the system securely in balance. They attributed the sense of professional balance as often coming from personal connections family and friends (associated with relatedness). They recognize aspects of their lives within and without the professional world that facilitate maintaining that balance, in a field wherein the opportunities to develop their craft may not be under their control. The themes reveal that the circus artists' sense of competency, autonomy and relatedness support their continued engagement in the profession, despite the instability it can offer.

Integrated Self-Knowledge: Building an Adaptive System

> *...it's about having a diverse system that is also resilient. So it's like, if you have a bit of a drought that year, or something, you have species growing that are resilient to this. And then if your, you know, water sensitive crops die out, you have this other thing that can be*

> *working for you. And if you, let's say you have the opposite, you get a lot of a lot of more water than normal, then you need ways that you're going to sink that water into the ground and like.....so it's kind of thinking [for circus artists] of all the different inputs into the system, and then all the different outputs and the system and how those things can help each other out and create a network of humans. (Participant 3)*

When confronted with the question of the meaning they attribute to professional sustainability, graduates indicated that as circus artists, the concepts they believe govern such a longevity of practice are multiple. Their interconnected responses indicate a commitment to process-based self-awareness in support of continued work that is physical, mental, emotional and creative. Understanding of what they seek in a professional activity (beyond the external promise of a paycheck) enables them to pursue opportunities, to adapt, and continue to engage in an inconstant profession in a way they deem healthy for their bodies and minds. The circus artists' words communicate that these multiple themes support one another, and create a myriad of possibilities of resilient, flexible adaptation.

The three composant sub-themes (Physical Knowledge and Mental Awareness, Knowing Your Why, and Capacity for Adaptation) work together as an integrated whole. In a resilient, adaptive system of self-knowledge, when one aspect is challenged, others can step in to help.

Physical Knowledge and Mental Awareness. The body is the circus artist's tool for the expression of their craft and their art. Supporting its continuous functioning was at the core of many participants' expression of initial conceptions of sustainability. They repeatedly identified the importance of taking care of their body, and having the knowledge to support its needs through practices based on well-being, rather than specific achievement or performance requirements. Physical Knowledge always signified experiential information related to adaptation in the interviews – knowing the particularities of their body, so that their practices can adapt to support its health.

> *…the number one way to [support longevity] is to get into a habit of practicing not only physical therapy as a maintenance, you know, something that sustains you throughout your training throughout your performance, but also understanding your muscle groups and how they work. And when one thing is acting up, what is something else that can correct it. And additionally, having the training to understand warm up and cool down. (Participant 13)*

Experiences, even challenging ones, during their education or in their professional career, had brought them to develop this particular physical knowledge and adaptive practices for its continued health. They believed it was important to integrate this kind of unique awareness slowly and attentively. Some wished they could have developed deeper awareness during their education.

> *All that stuff takes time, like knowing that now I just know so much more about my body and it all came through injuries and recovering from the injuries. I don't know anybody who takes their time to know their body because they don't have an injury. Unless they're studying to be a physical therapist or something like that. (Participant 5)*

Significantly, most statements about physical knowledge acknowledged a direct connection to the need for mental awareness in support of holistic well-being. Their physical knowledge would not be complete without support from the "mental," but mental knowledge meant different things to different participants. Those kinds of mental awareness included a sense of "hygiene," resilience, motivational factors, community, and professional identity.

> *So there's like your training load, there's the mental load, which is related to the training load, there's your how much you're resting, how you're resting, how you're eating. And each of those categories, has, I think, pretty specific answers depending on the artist, their discipline, their constitution, their age. When I say constitution, like, both their physical, like, just how their body is functioning, and also their mental constitution and what causes them stress, what causes them to feel safe, in a psychological sense, and how that relates to their training. (Participant 3)*

The specific nature of physical maintenance and mental balance or well-being, though connected, was expressed in terms of understanding one's self and needs.

> *..there's the physical component where you want to be able to maintain a body that is able to actually do the thing, do the physical circus thing. But also, I think a sustainable*

> *mind is a big part of that as well. It's really being able to have the mental capacity to get through an industry that's really difficult. This is kind of a particular industry in the sense that there's a lifestyle that kind of has to come with it. And I think sustainability comes with not only developing a certain mental...a certain mental fortitude, but also a certain understanding of self, as well -- and being able to have a conversation with yourself. (Participant 7)*

In these responses, there was an overarching acknowledgement that no universal formula for physical or mental training processes in support of well-being existed; that each artist, as a person, was individual, and their circumstances would affect the challenges they faced. The work of long-term professional growth meant developing diverse responses, knowing themselves and accessing tools at their disposal. The physical work of performing circus long-term had to be supported by a capacity for reflection, for knowledge of their individual mental needs and changing mental-physical states.

> *Sustainability. I first think of not like injuring yourself and dying all the time. Realities…. I think it's also… I think it might be a slight detachment of ego to difficult tricks. That's a big, that's a thing.... at least for me, that's definitely very personal… being able to just look at your work from different angles, I would say, to think of what the public sees, what you feel if you enjoy doing it…I think those kinds of questions help some of us become sustainable artists..... (Participant 12)*

Both personal satisfaction with performance, and audience satisfaction with performance connect to the inevitable physical adaptation necessitated by repetitive performance. Some responses in this research aligned with Amanda Langlois' work with ENC graduates ten years ago when her research noted that some graduates maintained a preoccupation with their perceived "level" of performance (Langlois, 2015). There, artists acknowledged a need to satisfy self and audience, both needs that guided choices governing physical well-being. Seen through the lens of SDT, the work of distinguishing the needs of the ego, and the value of pleasing an

audience can be seen as working towards an integration of an external regulation, yielding internal motivation.

> *…the greatest fatigue is, like you, you assume that most injuries and accidents come from muscle fatigue that come from like, we have the what is it… the central nervous system and then …anyway it has to do with the nervous system stimulation, and we think like, "Oh, my muscles are tired. So I get injured." And actually it's the fatigue of the nervous system being able to connect to the body...we focus so much on like, is the body okay? You can have a perfectly ready body and your mind is not there and you're fucked. (Participant 9)*

Many participants noted as professionals their focus had been primarily on their muscular preparation, but they discovered a need to learn mental preparation and maintenance of their neurological system in order to assure long-term physical well-being in repetitive performance contexts.

> *…circus is something that is so physical, like sustainability is often viewed in the context of how long can your body go before it gives out? And then, but then also, I feel like there's the kind of the mental aspect of it. And I think that really depends on like, kind of the environment you're in, right? Because there are [circus artists] who have the same act that they've been doing for 20 years and haven't changed at all. And for them, that is sustainable, but for me, mentally, that's not sustainable at all. You know, that doesn't seem fulfilling to me as a career. So like, I, I feel like I'm somebody who, to continue in this work, I need to find things that continue to interest me. And challenge me. (Participant 2)*

"Mental" as connected to physical also referred to interests, and knowledge of possibilities that different environments could offer. This recognition of adapting to repetitive circumstances both physically and mentally (in seeking out opportunities for change and challenge) also connects to the sub-theme of "Finding your Why" discussed later.

I was surprised to see the regular inclusion of the mental with the physical in participants' ideas. Participants consistently connected one to the other, which to me suggests they have seen the effects of mental outlook and preparation as integral to the organismic functioning of their

bodies; in particular, to their ability to work over a duration of time. They frequently referenced lived experiences in which their bodies had functioned well in short-term contexts, but when those same contexts extended in duration, their bodies were unable to adapt and injury often followed. The duration of performance contexts needed to be considered in their design of physical content in each performance situation: another kind of connection between the physical and the mental.

Mastery of their body in relation to their apparatus, or the continued development of physical skills directed towards optimizing performance were not concepts that appeared in the interviews. Perhaps professional circus artists assumed their mastery as professionals, or they simply did not connect sustainable physical development as artists to skill-based goals. They understood both physical and self-knowledge as a necessity for (and result of) adaptive processes to ensure performance capacity. The meanings they attributed to mental knowledge as it connected to physical awareness varied.

Knowing Your Why. Throughout our conversations, graduates expressed a sustaining awareness of their guiding motivations as circus artists. Each person is different. For many, knowing what they sought in professional experiences helped them to face inherent challenges (interpersonal working relations, omnipresent repetition, injury, employment insecurity). They acknowledged that not all stakeholders in professional circus have the same motivations, but knowing, understanding and accepting their own made it easier to work within situations wherein the power to make work-environment or creative decisions was outside of themselves. Most of their experiences attested to powerful sources of durable, intrinsic motivation.

They spoke of fun, of enjoyment as being integral to sustainability.

> *I suppose the main thing is, it's probably different for everyone, but I think one of the things is also just finding joy within it. And whatever that is for you and with that, find joy within the craft and with the people, with people that you love to work with. If it turns into a stressful job, I think that's not sustainable. And I think it's all about, and I think this is with anything, actually, finding a life that you love and enjoy. And that a lot of that is people but actually if you lose that, that isn't sustainable long term. (Participant 6)*

They spoke of meaning: discovering it, and acknowledging that each person will have a different vision of that meaning in their careers:

> *...I came to school, I thought I just wanted to be an interprète (a performer). And in some ways, like I do, but also I think I started to see the value more in what do I want to make? And what do I want to say? And so that definitely opens up more avenues. In terms of thinking more broadly. […] I think what's sustainable is so different for everybody, like some people truly just want to perform. Right? And so what is going to make them stay in the industry will be different. (Participant 2)*

They spoke of usefulness of certain practices; of learning what is necessary for well-being to support engagement in circus.

> *I think you need to keep growing. I at least for me, I don't like to be stuck in the same spot. I need to keep prompting myself, I need to keep creating, even if I'm going to perform the same sequences in the shows that I'm doing like I think everybody has their, their favorite sequences. I think that creating for me, for example, is necessary for my longevity. I'm creating sequences knowing that I'm never going to use them or probably rarely going to use them, or drops, for example, that are really aren't worth doing ever. But I'm still creating them because it keeps me in it, because that's what I enjoy to do. So for me, it's like, continue learning and creating. (Participant 4)*

They spoke of curiosity, play, and the possibility of connection with others who also enjoyed those aspects of the profession. Everyone's "why" would be unique, and could change, grow, or differ over a career, or over projects.

Participants also expressed integrated extrinsic motivations, taking aspects of the functioning of the professional milieu and relating them to personal intrinsic motivational values. (Deci & Ryan, 2000). They recognized that they might want their work to be governed by personal meaning, but sometimes, art can be "just a job," and that in itself has its own benefits.

Coming to that understanding facilitated their sense of autonomy, for they could choose to work in particular contexts and recognize both the beneficial and the challenging aspects of any kind of work. Identifying professional environments in this way brought artists to accept different kinds of work more easily, and to integrate aspects of "the way things work" into their individual professional sense of usefulness or fun. Circus artists needed to develop flexibility within their sense of purpose for their long-term engagement in the field to be sustainable.

Artists understood that diversifying the offer of disciplines they could perform would make them more attractive for a variety of employment. This external regulation (developing a different circus skill set to obtain employment) could align with their individual needs and preferences for ways of working, meaning or fun, and thus become integrated and a more durable source of motivation.

> *But like, I wanted to diversify what I can do. So basically, have different skills. Because it's nice to be a specialist and it's nice to push your craft as much as we can. But there's not always a place for let's say (primary discipline) in a show or something. So if you have something else, that will be any other discipline, then it makes yourself more[…]like it gets you more attractive to a casting director, if you can do more.[…] So training those challenges things-- it's not repetitive. That's something that really interests me. I don't like.... I like having a routine. But I like when there's space in that routine. (Participant 11)*

Professional contexts could be limiting, offering defined requirements that circus artists do not choose themselves (costuming, music, performance qualities, performance identities) but to which they had to adapt. The participants identified the need to find meaning and satisfaction within these contexts in order to integrate their choice to work in these situations.

> *…how do I still go about creating and doing something as an artist that is like sustainable and impactful to me, but within the framework of someone (else) that has these very specific guidelines about how I should create my work, and maybe realize that I don't… like I don't have--it pains me to say -- but like complete artistic liberty and freedom for every single job I do. Sometimes you have to fit the mold. And how do I find myself within that? (Participant 7)*

Each working environment presented different challenges, as well as different possibilities, for satisfying their needs and aligning with their motivations. Circus artists have lives outside of their work, and are simply people *hors piste*.

> *…a show a tour that you tour […]with a tour bus... Yes, sustainable with money, great. Creativity, zero, you get zero time. Zero time for yourself. So that's not good for that. So I guess it's hard because if, for example, you want to be sustainable in the creative space, I feel like you need to be often in your routine at home. You need to be in your stuff in your surroundings, you need to have time. And when you're working, you don't have that time. But if you do a residential show, you have the time. […]when I used to work for a residential show -- I loved it. Because it-- your work becomes quick. It's just one thing of your day. Yeah, and it's just, you like doing it because it's a show[…]So I say residential is good, if you can disconnect yourself from your work. (Participant 10)*

As a circus teacher, I had assumed that developing awareness of personal, sustaining intrinsic motivations happened within the rich experiences offered by the circus educational process. I hadn't identified that knowing and owning motivation sources was a process that developed and transformed over a lifetime – and this blind spot surprised me. The change from learning in an educational environment to working in a professional milieu is immense. Developing awareness of our individual motivations (either overarching big drivers, or smaller context-specific purposes) can begin in educational settings as a <u>continuing</u> reflexive practice for professional life. Working in alignment with our values and identified needs promotes holistic well-being and persistent engagement in activities (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003, Carpentier & Mageau, 2013).

> Comparisons between people whose motivation is authentic (literally, self-authored or endorsed) and those who are merely externally controlled for an action typically reveal that the former, relative to the latter, have more interest, excitement, and confidence, which in turn is manifest both as enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p.69)

A student-centered learning environment offers opportunities for learners to investigate and articulate their interests and needs, working to build awareness of individual motivations and composing with responsibilities, requirements and possibilities within educational structures. This conscious work in the context of circus discipline class would contribute to preparing students to know themselves better prior to becoming professionals, and support their future longevity in the field. When external regulations can be seen to align with usefulness, enjoyment, or a different purpose, circus artists can choose to pursue specific outcomes with awareness and simultaneously support their own durable motivation and well-being. (Deci & Ryan, 1987).

Capacity for Adaptation. Participants were deeply aware that their career paths had brought them a variety of working scenarios and conditions. Most of them had been a part of touring shows (tent and theatre) with many different companies, work in which they originated a role, work in which they had to learn someone else's choreography, creation processes under a director, the establishment of their own touring companies and creations, cabarets, television shows, festivals, corporate galas, and long-running shows in permanent theatres. All of those different settings came with different professional demands. At times, the requirements, codes or relational contexts weren't clear, either at the inception, or throughout the professional experience. Injury can be an experience that requires circus artists to adapt their approaches and capacities quickly and extensively. Participants emphasized that their adaptability was key to their longevity. Having the flexibility to meet changing demands with creative solutions, adjusting their expectations of experiences, using versatile skills to comply with expressed needs quickly, all are aspects of adaptability contributing to longevity. Within this adaptability,

identified like a skill, they included openness, a personal relational quality expressed as a valued professional behavior.

> *I feel like you have to be open. Because that's how you make connection. And that's how you create yourself, a surrounding of people that you would like to collaborate with, and they would like to collaborate with you too. So you have to stay open. And even open in your work, because sometimes, yeah, they might ask you to do something, and you might not like it at first, but you can make it your own and you can like what you do with it, […]and also to respect yourself and things that you change and the decisions that you take. (Participant 10)*

Working situations varied: sometimes highly directive, sometimes collaborative. Participants acknowledged that there could be incoherence between what a creation process purported itself to be and their lived experience of it. They emphasized the need to be adaptable to changes, to offer what they could and what would be welcome, depending on the environment.

> *I think if there's variety, like I'm happy to sometimes just go and do and learn (choreography) and then sometimes go and have a little bit more freedom. […]I don't like to do the same thing all the time. I'm also happy .... generally it's more a problem for people if they expect one thing and they go and they get the other deal. "Let's explore create," and only it's not. But you've got to be adaptable and sometimes, just go with the flow! (Participant 6)*

Adaptation requires personal acknowledgement of the known, the understood and mastered, enabling each individual to apply that knowledge creatively to a new situation or context. An emergent sub-theme of Self-Confidence connected to this Capacity for Adaption, necessary for career longevity. Perceived competence (Deci & Ryan, 2006) came from the participants' capacity to acknowledge their skills, their vision, their ideas. Alongside this professional value of openness – to possibility, to opinions, to direction, to collaboration-- they expressed a necessity for self-belief in their abilities when confronted with challenges that would require adaptation.

> *So being open minded, and I think being self-confident in what you're able to bring to the table, because like things will come from outside, maybe someone that you will work with*

> *will really like your work. And that will really be gratifying, but then you will maybe work with another director that's going to say, like, "Hey, I really don't like how you do these things."And like, " Your style is not this or this or this enough." And I think that if you don't have that self-confidence, then you might take it in a very negative way. (Participant 11)*

Self-confidence can be projected or performed, but can also be rooted in the artist's awareness of their individual working process and professional needs.

> *You know that saying, "Fake it till you make it?" I think that's part of the performance or performer in me.[…] I think it's the performer side of me that has that ability to just kind of talk myself into it. But the actual skill and real confidence inside of me, I think, comes from knowing that if I trust myself, and if I take all of the steps to do the thing, I can do the thing. (Participant 13)*

Capacity for Adaptation makes the possibility of work in varied contexts possible over the long-term. Openness preserves this welcoming of potential opportunities and connections. Self-confidence, stemming from a belief in individual competence, facilitates adaptation and tenacity when faced with challenges or judgement outside a circus artist's control.

While I had identified adaptation and the use of creativity in my personal reflections on professional sustainability, I had not conceived of its connection to the values or qualities of openness and self-confidence. I had simply thought of its practice in ever-changing parameters of performance: an activity which is offered in different contexts during the circus higher education program. Projection or protection, perceived competence is necessary for circus artists to develop a certain durability when facing experiences received as judgements or evaluations in professional contexts, what Deci & Ryan would term controlling, instead of informational events (Deci & Ryan, 1982, Carpentier & Mageau, 2013) . In a controlling situation, a circus artist feels compelled to comply, to manage certain rigid choices that are not their own (Deci & Ryan, 1987). This kind of control can arise when forced to wear an unwanted costume, when conditions of employments change without warning, work falls through, or a professional

experience does not align with their expectations. A participant spoke of a significant job loss, after which they opened their eyes to engagement with other work despite an initial feeling of failure.

> *So maybe being open minded in that sense, gave me the chance to work in different kinds of circus, meaning that (now) I've done the residential show. I've done the touring show. I've done the tent, and I've done the ice show as well and I've done the cruise ship. So there's many things that I was always curious about (that I did). (Participant 11)*

When receptiveness and curiosity endure despite setbacks, when loss can be accepted as possibility, the circus artist adapts and continues their engagement with the profession. It may be that adaptability creates a perception of confidence, as much as perceived confidence facilitates adaptability.

Holding and Expressing Limits

Participants connected experiences of maintaining limits to their capacity to their well-being and longevity in both professional and professionalizing educational contexts during our conversations.

The professional projects in which circus artists will engage present different working conditions and different demands. Circus artists identified adaptability as an important capacity: a competence contributing to sustainable careers by facilitating a variety of employment possibilities and conditions. Participants also acknowledged a shadow side to adaptability that required their attention and intentional management.

> *I realized, with working with so many different kinds of projects, and different kinds of people in more commercial settings, and more artistic experimental settings, that I'm the only one who knows what my limits are. And people will always ask for more than I'm willing to give and expect it. And I think for me, sustainability is really about that question of like, yeah, knowing my own limits, and being able to say, when is....when is it too much? When is it enough? Like, how much can I give and be able to continue giving to a project and be able to continue giving throughout my career? (Participant 8)*

The awareness and maintenance of limits (physical, creative, temporal, energetic, financial) was integral to the sustainability of a circus artist's work and engagement. The real expression of those limits also was essential to their health and longevity.

Circus artists are ultimately responsible for their own physical safety, and may find themselves in unsafe conditions for their performance or preparation. They can feel externally motivated to perform because of demands or needs of a production, or in an effort to build a cooperative reputation. They may not have been initiated into their professional responsibility for maintaining their own safety or integrity.

> *But in terms of the sustainability aspect, I just think that that can be a tricky thing, when you get into an industry where there's a lot of egos involved, a lot of people telling you how it is that you should do things, how it is that you should be performing your act, should you be performing your act, regardless of what your physical condition is. And people that end up, I personally believe, that end up being a little bit more dictated (to) by this external voice versus an internal drive, end up in a place where I think sustainability can become a major factor because they're following these voices telling them to do things that maybe their internal voice is saying that they shouldn't do. (Participant 7)*

Within the necessity of knowing and expressing personal limits, is also an acknowledgement that professional circus artists are not in control of all aspects of their working environment. There can be a pressure to perform, "the show must go on," driven internally by artists' values or externally by the needs of others. Participants stated that it was paramount for career longevity, for safety and well-being, that they have the courage to speak up when performance seems unsafe or damaging, that they own the responsibility of proposing alternative solutions, and that they manifest the confidence to walk away from uncompromising demands.

> *Speaking up when you're not ready, and making sure that you [thinking pause] … It is, at the end of the day, your life, your performance, your everything. Of course there are deadlines. Of course there are people that put pressure on you to make things, you know […] all of the life will throw every deadline or something at you. But when you don't feel ready in a trick, speak up, or say something... "Can we change this for now and I can*

> *keep working on this backstage?" you know, anything […], but it's not worth your life to stay silent about something like that. (Participant 13)*

Artist often referenced the need to develop alternative proposals in order to offer satisfying solutions when safety or health or feasibility was compromised. Those responsible for shows needed to have options, solutions, and circus artists needed to be able to propose them; to know what an audience would appreciate.

> *I mean, that has 100% happened at [Circus Company] with authorities, like ..."you need to do tricks," and you're like, "I should not and my doctor said ..." They're like "You should!" But that's their issue.... But as an artist to be able to hold your own and be like, "Nope, that's not sustainable for me"….So I think to be able to look in the long term ...do some personal research with the public that watches you to see if when you take out tricks or you don't, if it matters. (Participant 12)*

Circus artists recognized that the responsibility for their physical preservation and protection lay with them. Faced with conditions to which they could not adapt, they would have to brave frustration from employers, and to maintain their sense of self in holding their limits.

> *I know now, for me, that my sustainability is in part due to the fact that I can speak to myself and say, I don't care what director, I don't care who it is, I don't give a shit. Like if that person is going to come up to me on a day where I feel like crap or something in my body, like my back is out. And they're going to say that "You need to go out there and need to do that, because you need to have pride as a circus artist," I'm very comfortable just laughing in their face and being like, "Well, I do have pride as a circus artist. And what you're seeing as a result of that is this decision here, not the one that you're trying to talk to me about." (Participant 7)*

The necessity of expressing limits connected to performance fees and working conditions. Sometimes inexperience, or the simple necessity of making ends meet would provoke decisions to take on work that was not well-remunerated. Circus artists in general are not unionized, there is no easily published standard of pay within such a varied field of work.

> *...I wouldn't change what I have done in all of its unsustainability in my body and everything -- but it just is like such a.... in a certain way, you just kind of have to do it and then get that it's not the way that you want to do it. Financially sustainable is also super*

> *interesting. I mean, I've been kind of wrecking my life in a certain way. That's a bit of a violent way to put it. (Participant 5)*

Participants reflected that the ideology of circus itself promoted unsustainable behaviors, in its quest for virtuosic presentation and the necessity of recognized difficulty in performance. Professional decorum requires active receptiveness and adaptation, yet normalizing constant surpassing of oneself as a professional trait is untenable long-term.

> *Circus practice, in itself is often very much about pushing through limits, and dealing with, you know, it's like, we kind of know that the things that we do are painful, but we manage to push through. And there's a kind of respect that's given to people where it's like, oh, they did this drop, and it really, you can tell that it's pain, but it's like, "Good for you! You went beyond!" you know, "You went above and beyond what the human body is supposed to be able to do." Which I think sometimes can be great, but that kind of blends... It sort of has like stained this circus, the circus world, or like it's really become a part of everything where it's like, "Oh, but you can overcome this. We can ask more of you because it's okay. You're gonna go beyond a limit, like, there are no limits." And it becomes this really like valuable thing that people can ask of you. Or like, a valuable quality to have where like you don't have limits. And I think, yeah, I think it's just unsustainable and difficult. And it's really, really hard to speak up about it. (Participant 8)*

In this perspective, long-term professional growth required circus artists to express their limits in different working situations in which their personal agency, or power to act, seemed unclear. No employer wants their employee to be injured on the job, and yet a show must be delivered, in its immediacy every night, as well as over the long-term (if the project is a long running performance). Participants acknowledged that the physical content of their performances necessarily had to change over years of repeating the same show, and yet, the expression of their needs, of their safety, of their limits, to employers often seemed risky, tenuous, fragile for their reputations and employability. Circus artists' knowledge of their ability to make decisions, their sense of autonomy, did not seem to guarantee their power to make those choices. As professionals, they expected to work within challenges as a matter of course, and welcomed those challenges. "…you need to do stuff that's uncomfortable, and you've got to do

stuff that's hard. And you've got to do stuff when you don't really want to do stuff" (Participant 5). But they expressed concern that many professional projects did not seem to be planned from inception with employee longevity and well-being in mind.

> *...it's good to work in a space where I feel like other people have kind of the sustainability in mind. [...] And so I think, having people, like, higher up in productions and stuff like past school, who are kind of conscious of asking what the artists need, is super important. And like, I guess, at school, we could be taught to ask, but at the same time, like, then you kind of end up being a diva. So it kind of needs to be top down. Like, way better to be asked then to have to demand it. (Participant 2)*

The theme of Holding and Expressing Limits had never entered into my thinking when I imagined what might be essential for professional sustainability as a circus artist. My lack of awareness of this identified component, another blind spot in my imagination, gave me pause. I wondered if my lack of perception of this necessity was generational, or related to my cultural upbringing in dance, wherein physical risk, and often agency, was minimal. During the era of my training and work in dance, a personal expression of limits would be perceived often as a lack of professional respect or cooperation. Here, the circus graduates made clear that it was fundamental to communicate limits and to offer potential alternatives or solutions as professionals. I wondered if my assumption that students had felt empowered to express their limits and find other solutions with me in the context of class had been false, utopic.

> *...in school, you're there to find your limits and work up to them. And that's just like such a, I don't even know if there's really a right way or a wrong way to do that. But I think that there's something to be aware of within that. Because I think most of us within circus school go way past our limits and then that becomes the norm. Yet, I don't think we would be doing all this crazy shit that we see if we weren't passing our limits. So is there a healthy way to be in that in that super-athletic, pushing yourself to crazy extents? Like is there a healthy way to be in that place? I believe that there could be. I want to believe that there could be. (Participant 5)*

In the construction and development of the theme of Holding and Expressing Limits, I questioned how and if I had invited students to express their limits, and if so, had I listened? I

had distinct memories of directing class content, leaving space for and encouraging student initiative, adapting and changing focus when students expressed or demonstrated fatigue or incapacity, at times talking through fears or cajoling through discomfort. I remembered moments of insisting on their rest. But I am certain I didn't understand, and probably didn't listen, well enough sometimes. There is, within the context of a discipline class, a necessity of production, of demonstration, a point in which an *enchaînement* needs to be completed. In the development of an act for the graded, adjudicated evaluation of an *Épreuve Synthèse*, there is a sense of building an act that will demonstrate the student's cumulative technical mastery within their personal creative and performed world, and that development work will inevitably engender physical discomfort. I wondered if I had left space for students to express limits and equally to navigate discomfort, finding solutions within the context of discipline class. I thought I had checked in to help students assess their well-being regularly. How could I know if the skills, the choreographic phrase, the preparation, the exploration was too much, or not enough, for them? Did they know themselves?

> *Does the person have, at any point during a training session, the feeling that they can say no, or yes, or that they can say, "I want to do this," or "I want to stop," or "I need a break?" It's such a tricky area in sport, and then into performing arts and any kind of training setting. Because there's that line of meeting your edge and learning and developing. The sustainability of it is held in how is that person feeling in relation to what they're doing. That's such an important part, that I think is overlooked. I think it would have been nice if I could have had the space to show up to a training session, […] and be like, like, "I'm scared, can we work with my fear?" […]And I think I had my stuff as well, that contributed, but you have to put on a brave face and excel. (Participant 9)*

As teachers, each person we work with in circus education will be different, and different every day we interact. There is not a singular method, no "magic bullet" for checking in, validating, communicating that will work for all. The graduates indicated that their holding and expressing limits was a fundamental component of their professional longevity. To know and to navigate

each other's respective limits in educational and professional contexts, we all need to ask questions, to invite conversation, and to listen.

Keeping Balanced Through Connection

Personal connections facilitated circus artists' regulation of internal needs, and negotiation of the instability of professional life and work. Key supportive people helped them to maintain a sense of integration and balance within themselves and their professional circumstances. Throughout our conversations, participants identified that social connections, both inside and outside of the circus milieu, were essential for their well-being and the longevity of their careers.

> *I have moved around a lot and had a lot of sort of, like, unstable situations going on and, you know, different projects coming and falling through and all of that, but […], I have had like a really supportive family.[…], I think a lot of us (circus artists) are really lucky that we come from some kind of, like, stable place, and having that allows you to pursue this because I think if I had come from a more difficult home or a more difficult situation, I just, I would have said at some point, like I would have just thrown in the towel. (Participant 8)*

They noted that when they were able to establish a community of practice, everyone benefitted: sharing perspectives, experiences, information, resources, best practices, feedback, ideas. Relating to a group allowed them to enjoy a balance between themselves and their profession. This larger community facilitated continuing engagement with the circus milieu, especially through moments of uncertainty. For some, such a community went beyond family and other circus artists to include collaborating artists from other fields, roommates, childhood friends, and family members who provided encouragement and inspiration.

> *I was definitely feeling where I was like, being an artist is really hard and not sustainable. We want to keep coming back to that -- if you don't have a community -- because like, I think putting yourself out there as an artist you need people who you know are on your side in a certain way. And I think that was something that was really*

> *important for me that I was missing a little bit.... of just like having people that I knew believed in what I made, or loved me regardless of what I made. (Participant 5)*

Within the professional environment, quality personal connections were a determining factor in decisions about work, and even living, as some participants had chosen to live communally in locations because of professional and personal affinities. Participants stated that regularly they would choose to be involved in work opportunities because of the people involved. In that sense, these balancing connections integrated into the motivational reasonings, the professional "whys" of some participants.

> *I feel like something that I underestimated before... And I mean, we're told this in school, but I don't know. And just it never really clicked for me, but it was like, the people are super important. Like the people you're working with… like, I feel like right now above doing like, work that I feel like fulfills some societal good or whatever, I think working with people that I enjoy being around makes it for me. It's like a little bit more important just to have like an enjoyable experience. And yeah, be surrounded by people that you get along with, that are nice to work with. (Participant 2)*

Circus artists who were on tour for long periods, or involved with the same show for a long period of time, noted that it was more difficult to maintain the connections with those people outside of their work environment who brought balance and a wholeness to their personal and professional lives.

> *I have a very strong tendency to burn, to burn the candle kind of at both ends in a sense and not help myself out in that regard and be a bit of a workaholic. But I think that's part of the difficulty that comes with doing a job that you really love to do and are really passionate about is that you find it very hard to have that notion of a balanced lifestyle, and you know, having the time for friends and family. (Participant 7)*

The work of performing within an existing show can direct many aspects of an artist's life outside of their job. While some participants mentioned being able to more easily disconnect from long-term repetitive circus performance work, others found it difficult to find "fulfillment" and personal connection outside of a profession that demands preparation and readiness 6 days a week.

> *...my whole day pertains to the show, how I eat, what time I get up, what my facial hair looks like, you know, that all belongs to [circus company]. [...]I want to be a whole person. I feel like maybe I need to find that outside of circus. So maybe in speaking about sustainability there is finding fulfillment outside of not only the art we create, but the monotony of performing it as well, you know, it's finding fulfilment, finding fulfillment outside of work, because work is work. (Participant 1*)

Connection to people helped circus artists to know themselves beyond their professional, performer identity. Relatedness provided balance, meaningful living beyond employment. Personal connections may facilitate the maintenance of limits, so that work does not become all-encompassing.

> *...because you get so wrapped up in your craft and that your craft then becomes your identity, and people are judging your craft... finding a way through; those that find that balance of "This is what I do. This is what I love to do as part of what I do, but outside on my own, I've still got value as a human being. Even if I don't do this." and I think those are the ones that (have) long-term health, and I'm talking health, not just physical, but like overall health, those that have that more healthy balance between their craft and life, are the ones that I think will sustain it long term. (Participant 6*)

I knew from experience how a community of practice with my fellow circus teachers at ENC, or my fellow dancers, had deepened my engagement and enriched my life. Circus practice, particularly in aerial disciplines, can be solitary, individualistic, and even lonely. Students and teachers can feel silo-ed off from others within studios, semi-private learning bubbles within large spaces full of soloists learning and practicing. Even within those contexts, there exist opportunities to share work in progress, practice giving and receiving informational feedback and reflection, organize collaborative moments without compromising the unique progress and objectives of each student. Some participants expressed a real hunger for those opportunities of informational feedback from peers, and from other members of the school community, stating that the opportunity to observe the work of their peers advanced their own. Within the ENC community, disciplinary teachers did organize collaborative learning opportunities from time to time, modeling that communal, connective learning is possible even

in an individualized class context. The balancing, sustaining nature of relatedness facilitates our ability to manage challenges to our integrated system of self, as well as challenges outside of our control.

Longevity is Luck

Luck is an outlier concept, seemingly unrelated to self-knowledge, balance or limits. It is ephemeral within the professional space, but it is known and acknowledged. In interviews, participants connected many of their professional experiences, in particular when hired by others outside a usual circle of connections, to luck. Circumstances had made it so that they were cast or chosen – not only their readiness or skill. I understood this perception not as a negation of their competence, but as an assertion of it. They saw many circus artists in the field with a comparable skill-set and "look" to fit certain casting criteria. Luck, or simply being at the right place and available for work, or socially connected to a circumstance, made employment possible. In creating their own projects, circus artists had more control of aspects of their work, but could not control how it would be received, funded or bought. They did not exude a belief in personal exceptionalism, though they recognized themselves as distinct individuals in their personhood and artistry. There is much in unstable contract work that is not under circus artists' control, even if they prepare for and proactively pursue opportunities.

> *But my path has been very lucky, I think, to have zero problem finding work ever. Which is not like most people could say, I think. Super lucky and happy I did everything I did, but wouldn't want to redo all of it. (Participant 12)*

Negative experiences, like injury, were also presented as a matter of luck by many. Humans make mistakes. The attribution of misfortune to chance did not remove the necessity of knowledge and preparation, but was another acknowledgement of limits to circus artists' control.

However, they retained a sense that other opportunities present themselves despite, or even because of, setbacks.

> *A lot of that is luck. I really do think that's true. Because you can do all the physio and rehab exercise you want, you know, and then you just have one unlucky thing happens to you. And it's just a fact. What we do is dangerous, right? It's as safe as we can be. They're calculated risks, for sure. But you know, it's physical. And our bodies are not perfect, and we're not perfect. (Participant 1)*

Summary

Participants in semi-directed interviews offered a rich portrait of what their professional experiences had demonstrated as necessary to support career longevity. The themes constructed through reflexive thematic analysis revealed a complexity and interconnection that went beyond my limited personal imaginings in my role as teacher, and enriched the conceptual framework I had developed.

The textual data collected in these interviews aligned with aspects of the conceptual framework of sustainability for circus artists as supported by career management theory. Mental and physical wellness, enduring value alignment, adaptive skills, the necessity of autonomy, relatedness and an awareness of intrinsic motivational factors as means of finding balance after loss or in dealing with challenges: all parallel aspects of sustainability as lived by the research participants.

The lived experiences of graduates brought a richness to the specificity of circus career longevity.

When cognizant of the range of resources available to them, circus artists were able to persist in professional activities when aspects of their bodies or minds became challenged by constantly changing circumstances or experiences. Equipped with physical knowledge of the particularities of their bodies, the instrument of performance, and a sense of their needs for well-

being, they could adapt their functioning in varied or repetitive professional contexts with confidence. Awareness of their own values, their intrinsic or identified motivations in professional experiences facilitated their capacity to navigate challenges to their mental and physical functioning. Connection to supportive significant others (family, colleagues, friends) enabled them to persist when facing instability in the field of circus or inside themselves. Luck may grant them professional opportunities for development or change they can neither anticipate nor control.

A key identified element contributing to their longevity was their ability to maintain and to express limits. Overstepping these limits threatened their ability to maintain their systemic well-being. Professional culture in circus favors and often necessitates continuous adaptation, openness, negotiation. Pushing beyond the imaginable, performing the impossible, has been a part of circus' ethos since the 19th century. While occasional stretching of those limits is possible, and at times sought by the artists themselves, those artists are the only ones who can know and articulate those boundaries. These professionals consistently related working in environments wherein projects did not seem to have been designed with performance-performer sustainability as a parameter. The durability of circus artists' performance practice depends on respecting the limit they articulate, for it preserves the integrity of their balanced self, imbued with competence, autonomy and relatedness.

Question 2: Remembered Experiences of a Shared Learning Environment

In response to the second research question:

- How do circus artists remember the learning environment we shared in disciplinary circus classes as it relates to the support of autonomy?

The three overarching themes (Dancing through Decisions, Exploring Possibilities, and Acknowledging Complexity) constructed from the interviews offer a portrait of the experiences of teaching and learning shared in an autonomy-supportive learning environment within a high-performance professionalizing circus arts program. Together they convey the potentially complicated balance of learning goals and curricular requirements navigated by teachers and students. An organized educational environment through "limit and goal setting, rule reinforcement, guidance" (Carpentier & Mageau, 2013, p. 424) supports the development of competence by assuring predictability, along with the unknowns and choices offered through autonomy support.

In examining professional circus artists' memories of the learning environment we shared in the DEC-DEE program at the ENC, I hoped to learn of their experiences directly from them, in order to gain a more complete vision of autonomy-support within the context of circus discipline classes. My intention as a teacher had been to facilitate their autonomy through activities in discipline classes centered on circus movement: preparation and execution of known skills, development of new physical vocabulary, movement composition, improvisation, articulation of performance qualities, and preparation of an act.

"Autonomy connotes an inner endorsement of one's actions, the sense that they emanate from oneself and are one's own" (Deci & Ryan, 1987, p.1025). A sense of responsibility and ownership exist within autonomous choices, promoting active learner engagement within circus educational structures that prepare each future professional to be responsible for managing diverse employment contexts, contractual work and risk. I believed professional sustainability, durable engagement with the circus arts milieu, to be facilitated by an autonomy-supportive educational environment.

Our interactions in interviews allowed me to experience aspects of our work in class through their memories and perspectives; an opportunity to know myself differently within the teacher-student working relationship. They identified autonomy-supportive approaches within the context of our classwork through their experiences. Thanks to them, I identified aspects of my behaviors that may have been intended to support autonomy, but were control-oriented at certain moments.

Dancing through Decisions

This theme conveys the dialogue of teaching and learning conveyed to me by participants, a pattern of relationship and of communication. Dance was not used as a metaphor for avoidance (i.e., dancing around a problem), but rather for working in partnership, actively listening to each other's cues, and offering opportunities to lead and to follow. Professionals described a generative dance of proposing movement-based activity in classes, trying out an idea, and transforming it collaboratively; or the continuous dance of learning to communicate expectations and needs to each other.

> *…you're the kind of coach […]that allowed a lot of space and wanted to listen and wanted me to direct the class that I think it was a bit of a dance too, for me to want to own that and to (decide) "Yeah, I want to direct this class and have the space to step in into that confidently, but then also..." And I think for you... and I think you did.... feel into that and (sense) " I think she needs a bit more structure and direction." I think in the beginning there was a bit of questioning: How do we? What does she need? And when does she need it and…And for me to learn how do I express that? And how do I bring that into the lessons? (Participant 9)*

Participants described a dialogue of teaching and learning they perceived, wherein we both sought to understand the other, learned what the other wanted-needed. This is one of the challenges I found in my intention to promote active learning within a learning context with multiple, personalized objectives (technical mastery, creativity, composition, project

management). Each student was a very different person, with varying comfort in balancing their own ideas and objectives, while including mine (necessary not only for learning in dialogue, but also for integration into institutional functioning and the greater local milieu). Not everyone comes to circus school with ideas, wanting to manage their own educational project. Some students arrive and are so used to learning from and with peers that the presence of a teacher can be challenging. We learn, over time, to express what we need to each other respectfully. Students begin three years of training often with a developed competence in acrobatics, or knowledge of their apparatus. They arrive to higher education with their own skills, ideas, and perceptions. They may even already have self-knowledge of their personal effective training or creative practices.

> *I need the moments alone, as well as the moments with the external eye. Because I get nourished from the ideas that we discuss, it brings up a whole different notion of ideas in my mind that I then explore by myself, which then gives birth to other new propositions, which I then can come to class with, and just kind of create a cycle that continues to go and go. So it's really critical for me to have that in order to come as an active participant in the classes that we have together versus that notion that maybe some people have of going to a class and being like, "Tell me what to do or tell me how to explore." For me, it really comes to having a back and forth. (Participant 7)*

I felt circus higher education offers, rather than imposes, pathways, options, ideas, in a kind of stretching towards the undiscovered, the not-yet developed in the student. In this sense, the leader of the dance of learning regularly switches during the dancing. As a teacher, I can direct the class with a list of tasks to complete in preparation for a greater professionalizing objective. I can and must also leave space for students' ideas-proposals, so that we work coherently and cohesively towards the realization of the creative, mastery-driven physical work as they see it.

Working as a We. Dancing through Decisions incorporated two sub-themes.

Working as a We evolved from professionals' description of collaborative creative activities, decision making-moments in composition or developing research, and some experiences of co-creating plans for managing tasks. They described a strong presence of collaborative decision-making in the class, in which they had the opportunity for choice within options or structures I presented, the freedom to present their initiatives, or space to evaluate their choices in composition, performance and execution through dialogue.

> *I think you and me, we were on very similar wavelengths of like "oh, this isn't working at all," you know what I mean? Or "Oh my God, that was really cool," and that felt really natural for me. And you as the outside eye would be "Oh, that looks great. Now let's try and develop that."... And I think you had very good intuition as to when I needed some pushing and when to back off, really. I never felt with you as my coach, I never felt like I did something that I really didn't want to do. You know? I felt like I did things that I had to do or that I knew were going to be good for me. It's sort of like eating your vegetables. I guess, you know? (Participant 1)*

Defining Success. This theme elucidated aspects of the pedagogical relationship through memories of who or what decided if an activity or an action in class had been successful. Participants expressed feeling respected and supported in their choices, and that they were the authors of their work and its realization. At the same time, they communicated that I found informational ways to direct specific actions or structures, explaining the purpose or reason for doing so. They then had the opportunity to look at the activity and decide to continue it or not.

> *Because I don't remember (who decided), probably that means it was a pretty co- ....We worked together to figure it out. I think any of your suggestions, I was always pretty, I imagine, pretty down to do. And I think something I remembered was like, a trick that I might think, "Ah, it's not very interesting. I kind of will let that one go"..... that sometimes you would remind me "Oh, I remember that thing, it was actually kind of cool." And I think definitely helped. Yeah, it's definitely super helpful to not forget something or to come at it from another angle or wait a bit, and then look at it again. I mean, you definitely, you know, told me to do conditioning at the end and stuff like that. But like, I wasn't gonna do that by myself. (Participant 12)*

Many expressed a sense of moving progressively towards more responsibility for their choices and structure, as well as more freedom to decide.

> *Well, first year was this like, yeah, my opinion mattered. But your opinion was just stronger, because I'm a newbie. You know what I mean? And it was just like this and everything. I think, until at one point, it just, you have to -- I feel like your job was to let me grow and get my own objective. As much as my training was done. […] So I say first year of DEC you –me -- maybe 60 -40. Okay? Second year: 40-60. Third year: 20-80. (Participant 10)*

Most importantly, some professionals expressed that at times during our work together, having that space to propose and to decide within class challenged them, and made them uncomfortable.

> *And I was also given the freedom to sort of lead it, in a way which I still, I think it was sort of strange when I first came. […] I had no idea what I wanted to do. And I think that's particularly that first year I was I was still really new to circus. I hadn't actually really done much circus. So it's not like I had this whole vision of what I wanted to do. But I, that was probably a challenge for me at the beginning as I didn't really know what it was. […] I probably hated it in the moment. But now I see a lot more value in it. And now…In the moment, I don't think I enjoyed it, but I would appreciate it now. (Participant 6)*

Self-motivation can be an additional burden to carry. Proposing ideas or articulating needs can be too much some days. In the moments when self-determined choice is too much to manage, teachers step in differently to keep engagement going. They re-take the lead of the dance.

> *I think to a certain extent, I was able, able to say if there were things that I felt that I needed to work on or that I wanted to see. I felt like I could come and express what I needed or what I wanted to do. But when I think back I think most of the time, I was exhausted to a point where I didn't have like, a lot of desire for anything specific and I think it was more of a relief to have someone sort of like, "Do this. Do that. Yeah, let's do this." (Participant 8)*

Finding the balance in offering structure and direction, while facilitating students who have varying degrees of comfort with autonomy, is challenging. Teachers have different styles of communication, different visions of class objectives, and different personalities that contribute to a more informational or a more controlled learning environment (Deci & Ryan, 1982). I understood through these memories that in our classes, professionals had had opportunities to

take independent initiatives, they were encouraged to make choices within limits or frameworks, and they recognized a reason behind directions or decisions I made (Mageau & Valleyrand, 2003). I stepped in when they needed, offering them consistency and structure, and encouraging them to offer that to themselves as they managed their own creative projects in the preparation of work to be evaluated publicly at the end of each session (Carpentier & Mageau, 2013). They had experienced autonomy-support in a generally informational environment in our classes.

The range of autonomy students experience in a professional program can differ, not only from student to student, or teacher to teacher, but from day to day. There is a balance for teachers to find in encouraging autonomy, guiding process, facilitating learning and even directing tasks within an existing educational framework. Carl Rogers wrote that this humanistic approach was not something everyone would want to experience, or to which all learners should ascribe (Rogers, 1994). I appreciated hearing that the professionals with whom I connected in this research did not feel I had imposed autonomy upon them, but that they had engaged with it, and participated willingly in its development.

Exploring Possibilities

This theme constructs participant's experiences of generating and developing physical content within an informational learning environment in discipline class.

Participants communicated a sentiment of having both space and structure to discover and develop both previously known and new movement possibilities with support. They identified a usefulness in regular improvisational activities. Guided improvisations with their apparatus permitted them to research without expecting movement ideas to immediately function or to impress. A practice of exploration, without evaluation, is essential as a part of creative development, and skills-driven development. A professional described choosing to work on

certain skills in our classes instead of with a different teacher, in an attempt to articulate their experience of the learning environment.

> *...sometimes I would like do technique that I just wanted to work on, just to have like, a more open space. Like, to try to make corrections in technique. […] I think it's really common in gymnastics, it's kind of like the coach is at a certain level, and the student is at another level. And so it comes kind of with pressure on both sides, because the coach always feels like they need to have something to say, and then the student is supposed to, like, take that and do it. But sometimes, you just need to, like, do it a bunch of times. And just mess it up a bunch of times in your own way to, to figure it out, why it's not working. […]But sometimes it's nice to, do it and be like, "it wasn't that," and then you just let it go. So it's kind of it's just a space to work where it feels like –it's just like kind of less pressure, and also less judgment, straight off the bat. (Participant 2)*

This identification of an "open space" as one with "less pressure" or "less judgement" to me signified they felt the freedom and the support to try to work things out on their own. The framed explorations possible in class were appreciated as autonomy supportive activities, "placing value on self-initiation as well as encouraging choice, independent problem solving and participation in decision making" (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003, p.886).

Participants identified the use of open-ended questioning in circus discipline class as both a tool to facilitate self-observation and self-correction, as well as a means of prompting creative explorations, or changes within interpretive choices.

> *I think often, it was a little bit more open, like, "Why do you think it didn't work?" Or like, it would start with like, "What did you feel on that one?" Or like, "What did you try to change?" Or like, "Did that one feel different than the one before?" Like, it was a little bit more open-ended. And I felt like there's a little bit more room for me to have my input, when it was appropriate. (Participant 2)*

The framework of an improvisational structure could be conceptual, or a governing concept could provide a pathway for exploring a movement principle. Questions served as a

jumping off point for a shared experience, that we would discuss, and they might eventually evaluate as pertinent for further development or not.

> *...just the idea of like, coming into (the class), seeing an (aerial apparatus), okay, but it's an (apparatus), like what if we did something like this? What would happen? And just starting off the session with questioning, and that obviously made, like that would spark creativity and like, even if all the ideas fail, well, it's research, and I feel like research is never wasted. (Participant 4)*

Leaving space to try new things, without immediate focus on outcomes, creating regular opportunities for creative meandering, develops a trusting relationship wherein exploring the unknown for the fun of it is normalized. I was struck in the interviews by how much circus discipline learning develops through verbal communication, for the activity is often followed by a shared reflection of perspectives, experiences and ideas for continuation. In this sense, though the class centered on individualized physical activity, learning happened through conversation.

Working Tools. As a sub-theme of Exploring Possibilities, Working Tools identified the structures that had facilitated learning; repeated learning activities that professionals remembered from our shared work in class. Participants conveyed a sense of usefulness associated with these experiences. The activities they identified revealed structured approaches, or tools based in identifiable principles that participants had carried with them into their professional work.

A tool could be an approach for mastering a skill.

> *I don't know if I remember exactly what you did, because I think it was a long term process. But it was always kind of like you let me get comfortable with the trick low. And then I would kind of inch it up. And to a point where when we started running my number over and over again, the more height I would just inevitably gain because I required it for the next trick. And it was something that I think, I don't know if it was your technique, but it felt like it was the thought process was like it became that I was so comfortable with the trick at a lower height that by the time I was doing it higher, I had kind of forgotten my fear over it because I was so comfortable with the trick, that I just kind of went on autopilot. So that became a tool that I used forever. Because I would train the trick low*

> *and get to a point where I was so comfortable that low, I didn't care where I was-- at what height I was. (Participant 13)*

A tool could be a means of independently building a sense of competence.

> *So basically, you did give me that amazing tool of, you know what, write down three things you've done well today, write three things that was like, that you that you're proud of. And it could have been anything from "Oh, I had a very good class with Sarah this day," or I did, I don't know, "I was able to push more weight in conditioning." So like, all those things, was done every day. And I think after maybe a week and a half or two weeks, and I felt that....I felt better about myself. And then like, I was like, even though things were more, okay, I'm going to school from eight o'clock in the morning to four o'clock at night. There was something for me to look forward. (Participant 11)*

A tool could be an activity that allowed them to renew their connection to repetitive physical phrases.

> *You had a lots of prompts, which were cool [...]this idea of questioning, this I think I kept with me […] just like a way to spark motivation or inspiration. (Participant 4)*

When I examine the tools professionals remember using, I recognize my desire to empower autonomy in circus practice reflected back to me. I notice in this theme my own motivational source, hoping to develop activities useful to professionals during their education that might be pertinent later.

Using questioning as a means of building self-awareness in preparation for change-oriented feedback (from the teacher or the learner) conveys an inherent recognition of the learner's competence, and fosters their active engagement in their learning. A framework of intentions in structuring improvisational activities allows for a jumping-off point, a guide for making choices within the activity, a path for beginning a process. Within the activities of a circus discipline class exist the possibility of developing autonomous creative adaptation, and using tools that will be pertinent for some during their careers.

Acknowledging Complexity

> *What is the (circus) school for? Like, what…What goals is it trying to meet? […]it's not clear what their pedagogical goal is to the students. And I've had other people describe it to me as being like, "You, we want you to be as good at as many things as you possibly can be." And like that's kind of the overarching, like pedagogical mission. And like, it's not really stated clearly like this is the pedagogical goal of the school and overall, and making sure that that's understood by students and the teachers and that it is congruent, and that there's continuity within this. And even if people disagree with it, at least, it's like you have a base to work from. And you can disagree with it with some really strong principles or an argument or some kind of, you know, evidence. (Participant 3)*

Teaching and learning in professionalizing circus education is complex. We are distinct teachers and learners, with different personalities, ideas, needs, goals and understandings working in close relationship through communication that is both physical and verbal, navigating artistic and acrobatic risk through our differing values and shared resources within an educational framework. We work within program objectives, class objectives, and personal objectives, all of which we will understand differently. As we negotiate our way through different responsibilities and external regulations, we will experience incoherence, incongruity and even friction. Acknowledging Complexity as a theme is constructed around participants' experiences of confusion, conflict, reflexivity and sharing within our educational environment, as we work(ed) towards understanding ourselves, our context, and each other.

The semi-directed interview process allowed me not only to ask questions, but also to share memories, or to respond to professionals' questions about their past experiences, if and when they arose. In the construction of this theme, these important moments of shared experiences permitted me to see my work as a teacher with greater depth, and to understand myself differently. I was able to witness my own control-oriented behaviors that had occurred even with my intention to support autonomy.

Working for the Evaluation. Participants expressed how they understood the class objectives, or the goals of their discipline work in the sub-theme, Working for the Evaluation. Many professionals relayed that the goal or objective of the discipline class we shared (whether principal or complementary disciplines) was simply to create an act for evaluated performance at the end of each session. For some, this objective was not appreciated as a structuring element, but was seen as an imposed, external regulation that was not useful for their learning process.

> *The school set the goals, because we always needed to have an act. [thinking pause] Even if that's not the goal we[students] wanted, or the goal of the specific class, it was always there. (Participant 2)*

Certain participants expressed that the management of the production of this performance governed the overall functioning of class, and limited their experience of autonomy in research, composition, and development of performance qualities; forcing them into physical readiness, focusing on stamina and strength.

> *…when I think back to school, I really remember sort of these like critical periods, and it being very much based off of when the next presentation was or like it was at the end of the year there. You know, there was like a showing, kind of always, more or less, like, how ready do we need to be to show something? (Participant 8)*

Some professionals identified an appreciation for the structure this objective imposed, while others questioned its utility. A public evaluation (often called "presentations") offers a very different experience than a public performance.

> *And my (first job after graduation).... it was quite a big relief in a way because I think a lot of throughout school, I reflected afterwards and about like a lot of presentations. In the process that we'd done, it didn't actually feel like performing .....and, and I almost forgot how much I enjoyed the performing process until I actually left school because it was so focused on assessment, so-called performing, but it didn't feel the same. (Participant 6)*

Some professionals identified class goals different from showing work in presentation (i.e. mastery of specific movements, composition of phrases, building an approach to working, creating new vocabulary). Participants communicated generally that there existed an incoherence for them in the evaluative (graded) nature of end-of-session internal presentations, in particular when they as students had not had an opportunity to exchange feedback with the greater school community. Many expressed the pressure they perceived around the experience of presentation as limiting, rather than motivating; as an isolating, rather than a connective experience with their cohort. Most experienced the *Épreuve Synthèse*, the juried performance of a final circus act constructed as an expression of their technical and creative work as well as a professional representation to future employers, as a moment of satisfaction in its completion as a mammoth task, as a personalized process of creation, but questioned the singularity of its focus. A participant spoke of the emphasis on the individual in the Épreuve Synthèse, which can serve as a detriment to future collective working experiences.

> *There was a whole focus on this act, "This is my pinnacle moment of my career." They absolutely never do it again and then they go work. But it's the pinnacle moment. And we've gotta go and share who we are. That's part of it. But also learning how to work within a team and what it took for that I think wasn't fully prepped for a lot of people, we weren't really taught to focus on that side of it. Very honed in on this one act. (Participant 6)*

I interpret these observations through the lens of self-determination theory (SDT) to identify the experience of end of session presentations or the final act of the *Épreuve Synthèse* as an external regulation.

Interviews with graduates around their identification of actions that support professional sustainability demonstrated that they often manage extrinsic regulations as professionals, and are able to adapt to different contexts and demands of professional life by acknowledging their

enduring motivations in their work, and seeing the possibility of alignment with aspects of themselves that are useful or meaningful.

> To integrate a regulation, people must grasp its meaning and synthesize that meaning with respect to their other goals and values. Such deep, holistic processing (Kuhl & Fuhrmann, 1998) is facilitated by a sense of choice, volition, and freedom from excessive external pressure toward behaving or thinking a certain way. In this sense, support for autonomy allows individuals to actively transform values into their own. (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 74)

In any educational program or work structure, there are requirements to fulfill. It becomes important to discover not only the utility or purpose, but also the meaning, and the fun whenever possible.

Working with students to identify their values and goals, and then to find alignment between them and the extrinsic requirements of a program could be a meaningful experience in support of their autonomy. All people are different, and have the possibility of experiencing extrinsic events as more or less controlling. Some reactions are related to our personalities (which are more controlling, or more autonomy-supportive), and additionally may be affected by our social context (which can also be more controlling, or more autonomy-supportive). Part of the work of an autonomy-supportive circus discipline teacher could be to facilitate finding the meaning, the usefulness or the fun in the required end-of-session and end-of-program evaluated performance experiences. I don't remember actively engaging students in those discussions, though I do remember listening to their expression of frustration or and working with them to find the fun that could be possible during the *Éprueve Synthèse*.

During an interview, a participant asked if I, as their teacher, had experienced pressure to ensure the caliber of their performance in their graduation act, and if that had influenced our interactions at the time.

> *I did wonder, like, how much of you pushing me at times was, I guess I had this thought of "Is this going to be, or is this only for my benefit? Or is this because I'm Sarah Poole's [ ]student? And how much pressure is she feeling from the outside, from the school specifically?*

In their question, the participant reflected the insider cultural understanding that teachers' reputations for their pedagogical abilities were often connected to the perceived excellence of the performances of the students with whom they worked (Boutet-Lanouet et al., 2017, Skelling Desmeules, 2022). Their question took me by surprise, and made me examine my ego-engagement with teaching at that time. The idea that I had "pushed" for particular skill mastery or content, made me uncomfortable with myself, because it suggested that the participant hadn't necessarily chosen, or decided to take that action for themselves, but rather had complied with my direction. It was entirely possible, that while well-intentioned, I had denied them an experience of choice. I responded in our conversation:

> *In looking back on it honestly, I don't think (questioning tone) that I felt the ego of "These are MY students. And this is MY sort of like".... but I think I remember wanting to try to do the right thing for you with giving you advice on content in your act, so that you would get hired and be happy. And when I think about stuff now, or, like my evolution as a teacher, I, and maybe I'm wrong… I think it's a mistake to actually advise people to make work like "this" if you want to get hired. And I know that sounds very utopian of me. But I feel like if, if you don't make work that looks like you, if you don't make work that is what you enjoy doing, then you're not going to be able to find your place in the world. You're going to be wearing somebody else's shoes or, dressing like somebody else and not actually be that idea of being comfortable. What's the space that you're comfortable in evolving in? […] I think if I wanted to, to, or if I was like, "Maybe you should put XYZ (movement) in," or something like that. I don't think it was about me wanting to create an identity or notoriety as a coach at all. I think it was like, "What do I do so that these, you know, wonderful young human beings who, you know, love to be aerialists, what is the right thing to do so that they work?*

My answer demonstrates my own capacity for control-oriented behavior, even with my autonomy-supportive intentions through teaching. I held onto the specific outcome, (well-intentioned though it might be) of supporting their employability, something entirely out of my and their control: an imagined result, rather than an actual process. Earlier in that conversation, I had identified that I had felt pressure, within myself, in the context of the norms of the pedagogical culture as I perceived them and my inexperience there.

> *I remember feeling pressure and questioning myself, like, am I not doing the right thing? Because my colleagues are all asking their students to be able to run their act three times in the same hour. And I think that's (too much) …. And I'm just trying to ask them to run it one time in an hour. And should I be doing what everybody else is doing? Am I hurting this student by not asking (for more)?*

In the activity of preparation for a juried presentation, this participant expressed their experience of my control-oriented behavior, resulting from my own intrapersonal pressure to assure their readiness for the presentation and employment goals. Their acknowledgement of that complexity permitted me to see my own capacity for controlling behavior within intentions of supporting autonomy.

> *And I think if I had been paired up with a (different)coach […] I may have been bulldozed over, and ended up doing, you know, really scary, stupid things that I didn't necessarily want to be doing. And I don't know with you, I had so much freedom to find my voice…. And to continue finding my voice. Again, without fear of failure. You know, failure is gonna happen. Either way, right? And that's how we keep moving forward.*

Problematic Positivity. The final sub-theme, Problematic Positivity, constructs a more complex reflection of feedback in our interactions. In the Dance of Decisions, participants described a collaborative, informational environment that supported their autonomy. Learning happened through dialogue, proposals, and then shared reflections. In Exploring Possibilities, participants described autonomy-supportive change-oriented feedback strategies in context

(Carpentier & Mageau, 2013), such as teaching by questions, offering choices of solutions, using structured tools.

Teachers can support students' autonomy by acknowledging their feelings towards required tasks or rules (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Relational empathy supports autonomy, recognizing the importance of the student's experience, however it might be, in choosing to engage with the material.

> *I remember really appreciating your approach and the classes with you. […]I think you brought in, like a thoughtfulness[…], which I think, again, like totally ties into this idea of sustainability, where you really took the time to, you know, see the situation, figure out what was going on. And also like taking into account my, how I was feeling and having a moment to be able to talk. […]I got great, you know, technical skill out of (the program), but I didn't learn a lot about how to deal with life and circus at the same time. And I think that's something that you really brought, where it was more like a more sensitive approach and a more yeah, like thoughtful approach. – (Participant 8)*

This sub-theme of Problematic Positivity shares that I created relational empathy in some contexts, but not in others.

I began this theme examining the experience of managing failure within shared class contexts: their reactions, mine and the working atmosphere. They conveyed that in our learning environment, failure was meaningful, in that failure, mistakes, errors were an opportunity for learning and transformation of practice, taken as something normal, and integrated.

Failure could provide an opportunity for understanding.

> *But it was never seen as something negative. And for me, that's something that I do appreciate. And that's the thing as well, you do something physical. So those things are going to happen […]I think it was quite clear that it was part of the process, that those mistakes or failure were just something that makes you grow and it's something that you have to learn with. Because if let's say in a creative process, that kind of expression you're trying to get out or that message you're trying to convey doesn't really go through, then what was nice for me is that you were the person who was the outside eyes right away and you could tell me like, "I don't really understand why this movement is there? Do you know why you're looking at the floor instead of looking at us?" And then it's*

more of a reflection about like, Okay... Why do I do that movement? Why do have this intention inside of my act? (Participant 11)

Failure could lead to transformation and evolution.

I feel like a lot of times, I would make mistakes, and then you'd say "Oh, but that can be a trick." For sure. Like I feel like we transformed a lot of my mistakes into tricks. (Participant 4)

Failure could be fun, a delightful expression of our shared humanity.

Um, I never failed at anything, Sarah. I think I just nailed most of them. (laughter) I think it was also --- there was usually like laughter, like a lightness to it like there's never ..... there wasn't ever things that.... like I remember we would have classes with (another student) and you and I, we would just be like, we would just be like messing things up and falling and just (all) laughing about the fact that you mess things up. I never really remember failing at things in [circus discipline]. (Participant 5)

In the context of the same interview, I mentioned a shared experience that had stayed with me to the participant.

I remember there was one day, I think was in your third year, when I think you were having a rough time, or something like that. And you said to me, "Sarah, I feel like your feeling good about your day is a little bit dependent upon how I'm doing today. " Something to that effect. And I was like, oh, man, I really need to check that. I really need to check in with that…. for me in that particular moment, to your point, I remember thinking like, Why can't I just let (them) have a bad day? I mean, that's what I have to do anyway. But I, for me, your statement was actually like, a really important moment of just going like, yeah, (they're) just gonna have a bad day. And it doesn't mean that I did a bad job in my work as a teacher, if my student is just going through a rough time. They know that I'm there. (Sarah)

They responded:

I think it made me a think of like, I don't want cheerfulness right now, like, I don't want to be cheered up. It could have been….that could have been a sense of like, I want, I want the acknowledgement that like, this is really hard. (Participant 5)

In a different interview, a participant related to me a moment of frustration with my reaction.

…at times, I remember you being very protective, and wanting to be super positive, especially when I was frustrated. Which I guess could be…I remember being a little bit

frustrated with you as well, because I kind of wanted I don't know, sometimes you don't want someone who's just like, look at the bright side. Let's be positive. You know, I wanted someone who was like, "Oh, that sucks!" (Participant 1)

Yeah, exactly. It's like, I wasn't letting you have your emotion probably. You know. (Sarah)

I think also the sort of training background that I had come to school with, was definitely not a super positive environment. Sort of coming out of that old school competition training of doing something wrong and getting yelled at, or being punished. Which is not to say that that's better, but it's what I what I had grown up with. So it was it was familiar. (Participant 1)

Yeah, I'm pretty sure on my side, I consciously didn't want to do that, ever. (Sarah)

In both of these remembered experiences, I can identify my somewhat relentless positivity as a refusal to acknowledge the emotions of these students, and as such perhaps a control-oriented behavior. Neither student indicated that I lacked empathy, but in these examples, I was not offering them the possibility of living their feeling, and managing it themselves. Nor was I really listening or offering them space. Perhaps I did not know how to shift their focus away from themselves and onto the task, or how to offer them choices of actionable solutions. In these two contexts, I was trying to control outcomes through my interactions.

Summary

In sharing their lived experiences of the shared learning environment of circus discipline class, participants related a portrait of both activities and of a relationship that supported autonomy through physical practice. The theme of Dancing through Decisions conveyed shared responsibility for structure, co-creation of structure, and encouragement of taking the lead, making autonomous choices within an objective-driven environment. Exploring Possibilities communicated the learning activities that fostered space to invent without evaluation, tools to promote autonomy and motivation, and an emphasis on dialogue around classwork.

Acknowledging Complexity continued the relational and activity-oriented portrait anchored in the complexity of evaluation. Social Determination Theory experiments have demonstrated that teachers and coaches have a natural tendency towards autonomy-supportive or controlling behaviors, which can impact not only student well-being and self-confidence, but also their performance. While my intention has been to sustain an informational, autonomy-supportive environment through my work, I identified moments where my behaviors had been controlling, and thus undermining autonomy development.

I am grateful for the generous trust of the participants, who confidently shared their memories of experiences we shared, and made my continuing learning possible.

These professionals deepened my understanding of what is necessary to support professional sustainability in a field that is ever-changing, growth-oriented, and unpredictable. Sustainability implies not only longevity of career, but of well-being, engagement, adaptability and balance. Their stories and reflections allowed me to understand that a humanistic approach within the circus discipline learning environment can support the development of circus artists' autonomy, and as such, contribute to their eventual professional sustainability. Their generous investment in this research offered me an opportunity to transform my thinking and my work in the practice of teaching circus.

Chapter V: Conclusion

And the seasons they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We're captive on the carousel of time
We can't return, we can only look behind
From where we came
And go round and round and round
In the circle game

Joni Mitchell, *The Circle Game*

Circus higher education programs in Québec, vocational in nature, offer a legitimized, recognized path towards entry into the profession of circus artist in the twenty-first century. These programs function extremely well in preparing future circus artists for immediate work in the local and international professional circus milieu, as evidenced by their short-term employment benchmarks following graduation (École nationale de cirque, 2023, Lévêsque, 2025), used as indicators of program pertinence and graduate success. Yet circus artistry implies the long-term evolution of a circus practice that is physical, creative, and generative: an accumulation of professional experiences over time. The gathering of these working opportunities today, given particular employment inconsistency post-pandemic, limitations of national-provincial public arts funding, and ever-changing contexts of circus performance, requires active creative adaptation of circus knowledge and consistent autonomous preparation by circus artists.

Ministry-approved circus higher education curricular structures remain in place over time by design. Curricula are revised regularly, but might not alter quickly enough to prepare current students for industry needs: the actuality of ever-changing working contexts and conditions. This research presents information pertinent for teachers to examine the balance between training

for immediate work with preparation for a sustainable career through the activities of circus discipline classes.

What if graduates of circus school higher education programs navigated professional engagement as circus artists not as "'products' shaped by years of learning, research and evaluation," (Jacob, 2008, p. 23) but as people – performing artists whose education facilitated not only their development of unique physical mastery and performance quality, but of active knowledge of their relational resources, their intrinsic motivations, and their autonomy, all necessary to persist and to grow in their circus practice over time?

This qualitative research articulates the experiences of career sustainability related by professional circus artists who graduated from the *École nationale de cirque* between 2011 and 2021. In semi-directed interviews, these professionals shared their perspectives on what supported holistic career longevity in circus. They offered their memories of the specific learning environment we shared in circus discipline classes during their education. As Joni Mitchell affirms, we can't return to those moments, but through this research process, we looked behind at them together, and continued to learn in dialogue. That continuing exchange addressed the questions posed by this study.

Reflexive thematic analysis of the interviews demonstrated a complexity of interconnected ideas supporting sustainability: the circus artist as a self-aware, adaptable system, able to put limits on external demands and maintain a sense of balance through human connections. Knowledge of the particularities of their bodies and minds necessary for optimal work made it easier for them to adapt to different jobs and different demands. Awareness of their intrinsic motivations as they related to work environments helped them to navigate challenges (change, precarity, injury, rejection, repetition). Connections to family and friends

outside of the profession facilitated a sense of balance and persistence. Maintaining and expressing limits in varied working contexts was critical for their professional longevity. Professional circus artists called into question the circus ethos of consistently performing the impossible, unsustainable in its essence. Professionals are responsible for their own safety, for their own well-being, and as such must have the courage to express limits, within a professional culture that favors adaptation, openness and negotiation. Circus artists acknowledged a frequent lack of agentic control in many working contexts. Professional sustainability aligned with the development of autonomy, relatedness, and a sense of competence supporting intrinsic motivations for continued, balanced engagement with the milieu.

Professionals shared their memories of the learning environment of circus discipline class we shared during their program. Their stories related an environment where they had a sense of space to explore and make mistakes, to propose their own ideas and to direct their educational project, taking on more ownership and leadership through the years. They shared a sense of being supported by structures, having choices. During their learning process in class, they received tools for researching, training, or performing work that they continue to use.

Previous research at the ENC had conveyed important perceptions of pressure in performance from students and faculty (Langlois, 2015; La Fortune et al., 2016; Skelling Desmeules, 2022). My research also conveyed graduates' memories of the process of circus discipline learning being driven by evaluative experiences instead of shared performances: external regulations instead of integrated, purpose-driven motivators of creative, athletic performance. Noting the emphasis placed on the development of the act within the curriculum, graduates indicated their expectation of success in finding employment as a circus artist immediately upon graduation: being chosen to work for a company or project that was not their

own. The entrepreneurial context of circus arts in North America places a particular kind of stress on the educational institution, teachers and students; a perceived pressure to produce successful outcomes, rather than developing educational processes.

Researchers in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) have examined the presence of this performance-driven pressure in educational and sport coaching contexts. Teachers and coaches were found to have a natural orientation towards autonomy-supportive or controlling behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 1982). Additionally, the social context can affect an orientation of autonomy support or control. When teachers perceive they are responsible for the success of student achievement, they tend to act with more controlling behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 1987), and negate the autonomy that supports students' long-term performance and creativity (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Maintaining high standards and holding limits does not necessarily result in pressure, an external regulation outside of one's control. When change-oriented feedback can be informational instead of personal, offering clear choices, empathy, and suggestions (Carpentier & Mageau, 2013), external regulations can become integrated as the receiver experiences their autonomy in choosing to adapt their work, their performance, in line with themselves.

The semi-directed interviews allowed me opportunities to reflect on my past behaviors in connection with professionals who had been former students. They allowed me to understand that my actions in circus discipline classes had not only communicated important skill structures and creative development, relaying tools that professionals use even today in their work, but also had conveyed my intention to support student autonomy. These interviews also allowed me to identify that I experienced a desire to support employability as an educational outcome, something that was beyond my locus of control, and may have resulted in controlling behaviors in class.

Limitations

This research represents a limited, personal perspective in teaching and learning circus in higher education. I chose to focus my research on the experiences of professionals with whom I had worked, who offered me their perspectives on their professional lives, and their memories of classes we shared: a very specific scope. I have looked at the understandings of one teacher-researcher (myself) and not at an entire pedagogical culture. It was my identified personal intention to try to support autonomy in believing it would connect with professional sustainability. This value is not a part of the ENC's list of institutional values or mission statement. My subjectivity has been present throughout this study: made transparent through examining personal history and beliefs, owned through reflexive processes during data collection and analysis, and made evident through this writing. This qualitative research accepts its subjectivity.

It is possible that the professionals who indicated their interest in participating in semi-directed interviews for this research were only those who had connected positively with me as a teacher, and shared my values or perspectives around professional sustainability. The sample size itself (thirteen participants) is not particularly large, given that more than twenty circus artists graduate from the ENC every year. It may be that professionals who did not connect with the concept of professional sustainability simply did not participate in this research, and so their perspectives are not available to be integrated into the themes presented. A larger study of graduate experiences examining professional sustainability, including more graduates of the ENC specializing in different disciplines, might be pertinent.

As described by Savoie-Zacs (2018), in this qualitative-interpretive research, meaning has been co-created through the dialogue between researcher and participant, continuing the

opportunity of learning together we previously shared in the circus classroom. The thirteen artists interviewed actively participated in the research, and may have benefitted from the opportunity to reflect on their professional and educational experiences during our interview. The analysis results have not been corroborated by the participants. I look forward to opportunities to discuss these findings with them, or with others who take interest in the support of professional sustainability of circus artists in future.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research hopes to continue the work and questions of previous circus education researchers (Langlois, 2015; Burtt & Lavers, 2017; Funk, 2017; Skelling Desmeules, 2022; Funk 2024), by contributing to evolving perspectives on the objectives of circus higher education, the role of teachers, and the dialogical teaching-learning relationship with students. The "informal" (Funk, 2017, p. 108) teacher-student relationship in circus discipline classes, indirectly represented through this research, should continue to be investigated, for "…the quality of this relationship is a crucial determinant of athlete's satisfaction, motivation and improved performance" (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003, p. 884), which may hold true for students in circus higher education. In this sense, circus teacher-student relationships may offer a wealth of information to other fields of education today, wherein those pedagogical relationships have been disrupted and changed since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Changes in ideas governing arts education have evolved rapidly as circus arts programs have become institutionalized and legitimized (Rantisi & Leslie, 2013; Sizorn, 2019). Now, after forty years of existence for many of the higher education circus programs in Europe and North America, professional circus artists who are graduates of these higher circus education programs are returning to their originating vocational schools and re-investing their professional

knowledge as career teachers and directors. Research examining how their presence and knowledge shift existing pedagogical cultures or approaches, or how they change the transmission of circus knowledge from the modalities they experienced as students could provide powerful indicators of the pertinence of supporting sustainable career development for circus artists.

Circus education research has not yet prioritized the actual work or needs of teachers. Frameworks of professional competencies for circus teachers exist, but not a clear assessment of teacher needs. As specialist teachers of certain circus disciplines approach retirement, how is their domain-specific knowledge transmitted to a new generation of teachers, and how is it altered? This research examined the experiences of one teacher in relation to autonomy-support within circus discipline teaching. It could be furthered by examining autonomy-support and its presence or valuing by a pedagogical culture. The application of change-oriented feedback informed by self-determination theory would provide a rich source of information for circus teachers and SDT researchers, given the nature of circus' simultaneous physical and creative practice.

A Final Thought

> Perception of the world is influenced by skill, point of view, focus, language, and framework. The eye is not only a part of the brain, it is a part of tradition. How shall teaching be perceived? It depends upon what I think counts… What we come to see depends upon what we seek, and what we seek depends, as Gombrich has pointed out, on what we know how to say. Artists, Gombrich reminds us, do not paint what they see, they see what they are able to paint. (Eisner, 2017, p.46)

I began the studies that led me to this research simply because I wanted to better understand what I did, and to imagine differently what I could do as a circus discipline teacher in higher education, in order to keep doing it. I wanted to reinvigorate my practice with new information, so that it might grow and change. Looking now "behind from where I came," I can see that I sought to discover how to support sustainability in my own circus teaching practice, finding myself without clear limits, my resources unbalanced, having lost contact with aspects of my own intrinsic motivation.

It seems only natural to understand now that the very people who taught me what I needed to know about myself in this work were people whom I had "taught" once upon a time. That they could see their own creativity, autonomy, competence and relatedness in the balance of their lived professional experiences over the years (or its absence when things were not-so-sustainable) meant that they were actively painting with those colors. Thanks to this research project, I too am becoming a painter again.

I am struck by how the process of researching and writing this thesis has been a personal creative act. It has been the first time in a very long time that I have made something of my own design and imagining and shared it both with people I care about, and with strangers. For many years now, I have used my creativity to facilitate other people's work through circus teaching: a task I adore. It is useful, magical, fun. But I have not brought my own work into being for a while now. The doing of it is both terrible and restorative. The act of painting allows me to see.

The plurality of visions of what circus is as an art form, what circus teaching entails, what circus can become in the future, protects the depth and range of practice in the field. There is a great freedom afforded to us in teaching circus. There is no textbook to follow, no overarching approach that circus teachers must execute. There is a gift in the freedom we have to teach and

learn, to interpret and to experiment. We have an opportunity to reflect on practice and to work in alignment with our values. We should take those opportunities, know ourselves, and then say what we think counts.

Future circus artists can learn not only to make a living, but can also learn to make a more sustainable life through higher education. Circus teachers, in the creative act of teaching, can develop tools to support long-term, holistic development of future circus artists within performance-driven, vocational programs. They most likely have these tools already. They just need to paint their autonomy-supportive teaching practices in order to see them.

This research allowed me a unique and precious opportunity to see the space between myself and my practice (Starr, 2010) as a teacher. The curiosity and fun I experience in circus teaching has endured through challenging times, both globally (macro) and personally (micro). The possibility of learning about my context in circus from the outside while working within it has transformed how I understand what I do, and why I continue to do it. It remains a privilege to accompany a person who willingly challenges themselves every day, growing as an athlete, a performer and as a creator. I experience my own autonomy in choosing to continue to connect with this profession. This research, these conversations, have supported my own professional sustainability.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Invitation Letter to Graduate Participants

Dear X,

I hope this letter finds you well!

I am writing to you today in my role as a Masters student at Concordia University in Montreal. My studies explore my personal teaching practice as a teacher of circus arts in a professionalizing program. I hope, through conversation with you, to identify meaningful approaches or significant practices you experienced in your education in classes with me that have since been useful in different phases of your professional life.

I am writing to ask if you would be interested in and willing to participate in my research.

If you agree, you will be asked to attend a video interview of 60-75 minutes with me, by Zoom, at a date and time that would be convenient for you, within the next month. You would accept that I video and audio record our interview for later transcription and analysis. Our conversation would contain certain defined questions, but would leave room for improvisation.

You may withdraw at any time. There is no obligation to respond to all of the questions I ask in the interview. The qualitative data collected from the interviews will be presented in the form of a Masters thesis, and be read by the thesis advisory committee, the institutions where the research took place, and the participants, if interested. We could have a follow-up discussion to clarify anything you might want to bring to light.

Your identity would not be disclosed in any publication of the research. I would invent a pseudonym for you and protect your identity in any written reference in my final research publication.

I hope to interview ten different graduates of *École nationale de cirque* with whom I have worked as a coach between 2011 and 2021.

Informed Consent:

If you agree to participate in my project, you will receive an Informed Consent form, and we will arrange a convenient moment for your interview. The video and audio recordings from this research will not be disseminated. The polished data gathered from this research may be used in other contexts, including my personal research reports, published articles or forthcoming thesis. The data will not be used to evaluate circus education, circus programs, or compare performance.

If you agree to participate in this survey, please respond to this email by **_____.**

If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me, or my advisor Patrick Leroux: patrick.leroux@concordia.ca

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Appendix B

Information and Consent Form

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM – Graduate Participants

Study Title: Teaching the Sustainable Circus Artist: A reflection on personal practice
Researcher: Sarah Poole, INDI MA Student, Concordia University
s_poole@live.concordia.ca
(514)967-6535

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Louis Patrick Leroux, Associate Dean of Research
Professor, Dept. of English &
Dept des études françaises
patrick.leroux@concordia.ca
(514) 848-2424, ext. 4327

Source of funding for the study: None

You are being invited to participate in the research study mentioned above. This form provides information about what participating would mean. Please read it carefully before deciding if you want to participate or not. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

PURPOSE
This research will investigate current and evolving teaching approaches and practices in professionalizing circus education through the lens of a circus teacher's examination of their own teaching, and the perspectives of people who have experienced it. The researcher will be looking at her own practices through an analysis of her reflections on daily teaching in a specialty class as well as through interviews with former students, in order to examine what pedagogical approaches might support the development of a "sustainable" circus artist.

B. PROCEDURES

If you participate, you will be asked:

__ To share your memories, experiences, ideas and opinions in the context of a 60-75 minute individual interview with the researcher by Zoom; and to accept that the interview is recorded and analyzed.

___ To offer to the researcher's supervisor via e-mail any responses to questions you wish to answer, but do not feel comfortable responding to directly in the context of a recorded interview conversation with the researcher.

C. RISKS AND BENEFITS

Risks:
This research presents no foreseeable risks to the participants. It does not involved deception, nor does it present physical, personal, reputational or ethical concerns, An interview may bring up uncomfortable unrelated issues as it is a conversation in confidence. You may terminate the interview at any time. You may decline to answer any questions. You may respond to any questions indirectly by contacting the Researcher's Faculty Supervisor. There is no actual, potential or apparent conflict of interest for the Researcher or her Faculty Supervisor, nor is there an actual, potential or apparent conflict of interest on the part of Concordia University or the National Circus School.

Benefits:
This research is not intended to benefit you personally or directly. Participants will have an opportunity to self-reflect on their own learning styles and processes and, to assess the impact, benefits and perhaps limitations of their training on their career trajectories. This research hopes to contribute to the growing body of knowledge around current circus teaching practices in professionalizing contexts. Professional sustainability in circus requires the development of knowledge and skills beyond physical performance. Certain pedagogical approaches and practices may facilitate the development of such skills. The researcher hopes to better define and understand her own perspectives and actions as a teacher through the context of this research, and offer it to the field of coaching and teaching.

D. CONFIDENTIALITY

The Researcher will gather the following information as part of this research:
Videos-Transcripts of Semi-Directed Interviews

No one will be allowed to access the information, except those directly involved in conducting the research. The information gathered in interviews will only be used for the purposes of the research described in this form. The information gathered will not be used for commercial purposes.

Your name will be removed and replaced with a code during the research. Only specific individuals on the research team will have access to the code, meaning that they can re-identify you as a participant if necessary. Your real identity will not be revealed in disseminated results. The details of your identity will be obscured.

The information will be protected by being stored on a password protected, encrypted separate hard drive, which will be kept in a lock-box in a secure location in the researcher's home, which is itself a secure location

The results of the research will be published in the Researcher's MA Thesis, and potentially in any resulting articles. However, it will not be possible to identify you in the published results.

We will destroy the information seven years after the end of the study.

F. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

You do not have to participate in this research. It is purely your decision. If you do participate, you can stop at any time. You can also ask that the information you provided not be used, and your choice will be respected. If you decide that you don't want us to use your information, please inform the Researcher or her supervisor before January 1, 2023.

There are no negative consequences for not participating, stopping in the middle, or asking us not to use your information.

G. PARTICIPANT'S DECLARATION

I have read and understood this form. I have had the chance to ask questions about my participation to anyone of my choosing and any questions have been answered. I agree to participate in this research under the conditions described.

NAME
(please print) _____

SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

If you have questions about the scientific or scholarly aspects of this research, please contact the researcher. Their contact information is on page 1. You may also contact their faculty supervisor. You are free to ask questions about your participation, and to discuss your participation in this research with anyone of your choosing at any time.

If you have concerns about ethical issues in this research, please contact the Manager, Research Ethics, Concordia University, 514.848.2424 ex. 7481 or oor.ethics@concordia.ca

Appendix C

Semi-Directed Interview Question Guide and Intro:

Introduction Script for Interviews:

Hello, (Interviewees Name), thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my research project through this interview. I have already received your signed Consent to Participate letter by e-mail. To reiterate, we will spend the next 60-75 minutes in a semi-directed interview, discussing questions related to my MA Research at Concordia. We will be discussing evolving pedagogical practices in circus professionalizing education, through the lens of my own practice, in which you engaged with me from (20—to 20--). Our interview is being recorded for audio and video. These recordings are kept in a password protected drive in a locked location in my home office. The content of our discussion will be analyzed and used solely for the purposes of this research. Only I and my supervisor will have access to this recording. Your name will be replaced by a pseudonym and any identifying characteristics will be protected by in order to respect confidentiality in the presentation of the research. If there are any questions today to which you do not wish to respond, please inform me, and we will go on to the next question. If ever there is any question to which you do not wish to respond to me directly, but would like to offer a response, please feel free to contact my supervisor, Dr. Louis Patrick Leroux, patrick.leroux@concordia.ca, who can pass on your information anonymously to me if you would like. You are free to end this interview at any time. You can withdraw your participation from this research by contacting me or my supervisor at any time.

To begin our interview today, could you state your name, your profession? How do you define yourself professionally? When was the last time you and I have seen each other in person?

Tell me a little about your life, your path as a circus artist, since graduation.

My research looks into ways of teaching in circus to see possible connections between the way that we teach and fostering long-term development in circus artists. I am looking at manners of teaching that may foster sustainability in the careers of circus artists.

What does sustainability mean to you? What is sustainable development for a circus artist?

Tell me about a professional experience you've had which was meaningful for you. What was that like?

We worked together in x class over x years. What do you remember in particular about that?

Who was responsible for setting the goals of the class? Of the course?

How was success recognized?

How did you react to failure/mistakes? How did I?

Tell me what you remember about problem solving, or imagination games?

What were some of the activities we did that were useful to you? In the moment? Since?

What do you think could be done differently to support the development of sustainability in circus artists?

Anything you'd like to add about sustainability that I haven't asked you about? Anything you would like to share about working together in class?

Appendix D

Snapshot Experience Memo

I was auditing a class on Periodization on a rainy fall Saturday.

The teacher's point that day was that each person in training is different, and in working to improve physical outcomes, we as teachers need to be highly observant and engaged with each student who follows a program we create or perhaps even co-create based on student input. He explained that the human organism wants to and will remain in stasis, unless it is pushed. Without a stressor, no change will happen. Yet each human organism will adapt differently to the stressors (training) that is offered. 15% too much, and the athlete becomes overtrained-exhausted-injured. 15% not enough, and the person's physical performance won't actually change or improve. This small window of possibility of creating change incited us as teachers to make the athlete-students the centre of our focus; we needed to know and check in with them on how their adaptive processes were being lived. "If you want to teach Francesco (aka any student), you have to KNOW Francesco," the teacher repeated many times. Each student-athlete is and will be different.

My work these years as a teacher has brought me to reframe this statement. If I want to teach Francesco, I have to know myself. I have to know Francesco too, but if I want to understand or participate in learning as a dialogical process, I need to know myself: my beliefs, my objectives, my triggers, and my needs in order to differentiate them from those of a student or of a program.

How can I make sure that I am hearing-seeing the student in front of me? Am I able to facilitate their learning process in the context of an existing educational culture, in ways that satisfy the requirements of an institutional structure, and support the individual learner, in alignment with what I perceive and understand? I need to have a continuing reflexive perspective on my own teaching as it relates to the students work in the immediate and in the long-term.