



Art-Based Approaches to Health Promotion Policy Development

Kakungulu Samuel J.

Faculty of Education, Kampala International University, Uganda

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intersection of art and health promotion policy development, highlighting the role of arts-based approaches in shaping health interventions. By examining various case studies and methodologies, the paper discusses how arts, particularly visual and performing arts, have been utilized to communicate health messages, foster community engagement, and influence public health policy. The power of art to transcend cultural and social boundaries, provoke emotional responses, and offer new ways of thinking is emphasized. The paper concludes that while arts-based approaches show promise in health policy development, further research and sustained support are needed to enhance their long-term effectiveness and scalability.

Keywords: Art-based health promotion, Health policy development, Community engagement, Visual and performing arts, Public health interventions.

INTRODUCTION

In recognition of World Health Day in 2015, the importance of using the arts to promote healthy environments for the best health outcomes was emphasized. The idea was to “harness the arts,” and in so doing, to bring creativity where it is often least present: in the development of health policy. A growing evidence base confirms that arts-based and art-infused approaches can shift the contours of health interventions. In health promotion, this kind of innovation is especially important as it requires the participation of whole communities to be successful. The rise of arts and health initiatives demonstrates the new and more visible creative physical programming connected to the notion of artistic creativity as health enhancement [1, 2]. Challenges in promoting health are notoriously siloed; strategies tend to focus on changing individual behaviors or on building new services instead of taking health policy approaches based on social determinants. Accordingly, calls for art-based approaches to address socio-environmental challenges simultaneously call for new strategies of community engagement. Health promotion, by both definition and necessity, operates intersectorally and is, or should be, informed by evidence from diverse perspectives. Arts- and health-based initiatives have the potential to both sensitize health policymakers to new forms of evidence and embed knowledge at the level of experience. Health promotion too has been urged to think more creatively about the temporal, the aesthetic, and its possible futures, to facilitate imaginative reconfigurations of “what currently ‘goes without saying’” in policy development. It is beyond clinical evidence; bigger than health promotion, multifaceted, and manifold. These resources could be harnessed to address policy blindness as well as knowledge blindness, which permeates health care and public policy in many other sectors [3, 4].

The Intersection of Art and Health Promotion

Art is often used to promote important health messages, using mediums such as theatre, dance, visual arts, music, and writing to communicate issues such as HIV/AIDS, safe sex practices, mental illness, victim impact statements, and physical activity. The art form selected will depend on the message being communicated, the target group, and the desired outcomes. Engaging the target group in the artistic process through co-creation, performance, or reaction is an effective means of encouraging discussion and changing attitudes. In part, the ability of art to challenge, provoke, and transform is a function of the

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creativity of the artist. Creative expression can become a way of discovering and expressing a voice and is central to self-discovery, self-expression, and to having a voice in the community [5, 6]. Art engages and informs in ways that stretch beyond the limitations of text, speech, and action and has the power to create lasting impressions and provoke change in those who witness or participate in it. The power of visual and performing arts has been harnessed by arts for health and well-being initiatives within the health sector internationally, but artists are increasingly becoming partners in health promotion initiatives across a range of areas. It has been shown in research that arts, health, and society intersect in many ways which can have reciprocal health-promoting benefits. Although limited, this evidence suggests that there may be value in exploring further how art can be used to shape healthy policy as well as shape the health context in which policy is formulated. Art may challenge existing ways of thinking by communicating in ways that transcend material, cultural, and social limitations and stimulate a change of behavior individually and in communities [7, 8].

The Role of Art in Policy Development

Complex systems theories underscore the challenges of getting any system, including a policy system, to perform well, particularly in non-linear and often unpredictably changing social and cultural contexts such as those within which health promotion policymakers and practitioners operate. The ideas developed above and our experience prompt us to explore new strategies that have scarcely been conceived as evidence-based approaches [9, 10]. We are trialing two such strategies. First, rather than using current findings and evidence about people's health issues and possibilities to inform policy, we are instead examining the integration of data-gathering directly from community members using arts-based methods into the fullness of developing evidence-based policy. Second, we are testing the capacity of these arts-based methods to foster a dialogical and co-creative public inquiry approach to health promotion policy development. We believe that effective health policy change is more likely to occur if the responses to identified possible health directions offer resonances with people, through the generation of shared emotional responses and mutual care within policy constructs. The arts, we argue, have the power to access these emotional, symbolic, and transformative dimensions [11, 12]. The power and potential of arts-based approaches to create and sustain change in the health agenda are illustrated by several national and international arts programs that are influencing public awareness and agenda. Through the creation of a piece that toured for a decade throughout Europe, Gaza, and Cambodia, a global delegate created a media arts event that drew together a diverse community in a meadow in Western Ireland to watch a flow of evocative images travel around the world in real-time. Hundreds of pairs of eyes looked at the computer screen as the images emerged. A press article the following day explained the impact: "It is easy to forget how privileged Westerners are to have access to such modern technology as the internet. But an incident on Tuesday night serves as a wake-up call." Consider the fear, surprise, and delight of everyone sitting in that field watching the global village receive her message. By impressing upon the audience, the privilege of Western people's access to the internet, access to news, and access to education, we buttress our argument about the power of art [13, 14].

Case Studies and Examples

So how do artists, non-arts practitioners, and public health specialists come together to create art-based health promotion policies with the potential to influence population health? In this section, we provide several examples of successful initiatives that have led to a documented improvement in public health or existing case studies. The paper will investigate the methodological steps involved in creating policy and artistic intervention, the art form used, the group of participants, and the nature of the end product. We will also describe evidence of the impact of these projects using examples of testimonials provided by either the artists themselves, the participants, or the policymakers involved in the study [15, 16]. Overall, small numbers of people have been affected by these interventions. Nonetheless, the testimonials supported the existing evidence in that the participants found the initiatives moving, meaningful, and relevant to their lives. It is too soon to say what the longer-term effects of these projects will be. However, some of the cases identified highlight the potential, as well as the pitfalls, involved in bringing public health knowledge to a wider audience using an arts-based approach. Thus, it concludes by discussing lessons learned and recommendations for good practice identified from the case studies reviewed. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully evaluate the impact of the various art initiatives, practitioners agree on the benefits of involving art in public health because art can convey health messages powerfully and emotionally. Art can present a clearer, non-verbal representation of an issue, and this combination of emotion and information affects viewers on several levels, including cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic responses that go beyond traditional health messages and warnings.

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Despite the proven benefits, the paper concludes that more research is needed to support this approach, and evaluation studies addressing these gaps are needed to guide future work [17, 18].

Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing Art-Based Approaches

In our experience, encouraging a shift to arts- and humanities-informed health promotion can be difficult. There is institutional and systemic resistance, and funding available to codes in which arts are not named is limited. An art-based approach thus requires a commitment from both sectors. There are many logistical challenges involved in creating art-based platforms for health promotion. Because it is not currently a systemic value, the process of obtaining support is time-intensive. Simply striving to expand Making Space beyond its Ottawa museum collaborators, we are investing 10% of the two-year project budget in an education initiative. This type of approach takes time; progress is often slow. The temporary nature of arts-based work means that project managers must plan for long-term sustainability at project inception, placing one extra burden on nascent initiatives. Many arts-based initiatives struggle to find funding and space in which they can house their teachings. The arts are a soft target when dollars are needed for essential services as they are seen primarily as extraneous luxuries [19, 20]. Nevertheless, arts-based research carries great potential for effecting policy and practice change: • By operating on the creative level, a policy-guided artistic initiative can affect audience attitudes and create a more welcoming space for potentially similar health policy changes. • By representing art-based methodologies as legitimate research tools in educational programming, the next generation of health and art professionals will join the system ready to integrate these skills usefully. • Because it requires collaboration, in particular steering from stakeholders and citizens, arts-informed programming may contain the seeds of the multi-sectoral approach necessary to tackle the determinants of health as they address whole communities in a unified, non-segmented approach. Given that we face some of the barriers discussed here, creating a concerted policy seems to be both an effective tactic and a useful learning experience for us. We see the goal of this piece as opening a dialogue on the possible integration of the arts with health policy. Given the impractical nature of our desired goals, which are dependent on a paradigm shift in traditional ways of viewing health, we believe that continued exploration will result in a practical outcome [21, 22].

CONCLUSION

Art-based approaches offer a unique and powerful method for shaping health promotion policies, enabling the communication of complex health messages in more accessible and emotionally engaging ways. By fostering co-creation and community participation, these approaches can bridge the gap between public health objectives and the lived experiences of communities. Although challenges such as systemic resistance and limited funding hinder widespread implementation, the potential benefits of integrating arts into health policy are significant. Future research should focus on evaluating the long-term impact of these initiatives to build a stronger evidence base for their role in health promotion. The transformative power of the arts, combined with multi-sectoral collaboration, may unlock new avenues for improving public health outcomes.

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