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Popular Theatre as Primary Prevention Approach for Indigenous Youth Suicide: Exploring the Role of Physicians in Community Arts

Rita Henderson², PhD; Keri Williams¹, MSc, PhD (Candidate); Stephanie Montesanti^{1,3},
PhD; Lynden Crowshoe², MD

¹Dept. of Community Health Sciences, University of Calgary

²Dept. of Family Medicine, University of Calgary

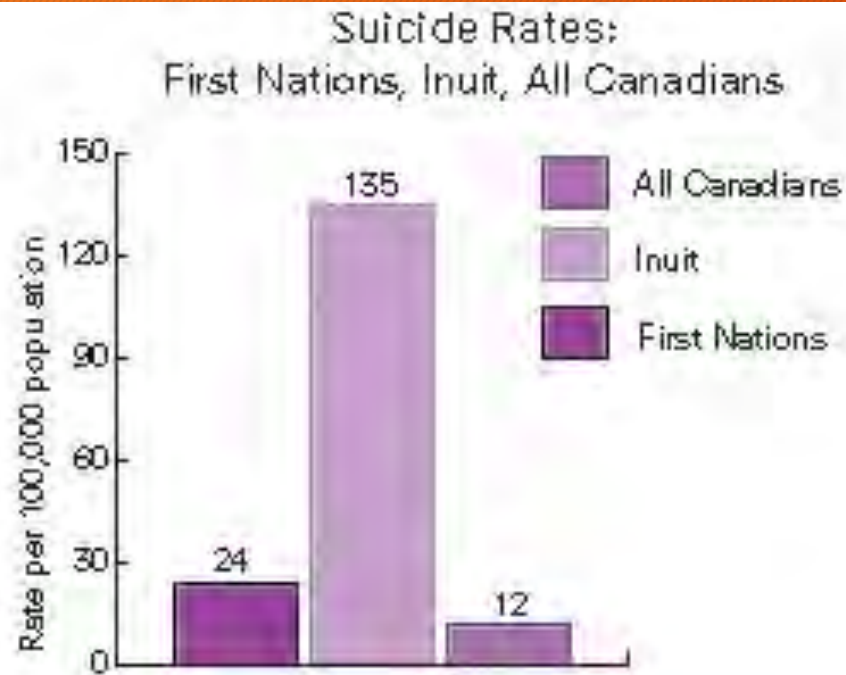
³School of Public Health, University of Alberta

Call to Action

To strengthen the evidence base, we outline a community-based Popular Theater (PT) program as a relevant model of community arts for suicide prevention

For service providers and policy makers, the participatory model poses a call to action to be advocates with community

Context



- Rather than focusing on individual pathology, Indigenous communities in Canada relate the current epidemic of youth suicide to deep historical and structural roots

Context

- Effective primary prevention strategies are urgently needed upstream from mental health crisis onset
- Challenges emerge in the implementation of holistic prevention approaches that unite individuals, families, service providers, and communities in common healing projects

Popular Theatre as Primary Prevention

Popular Theatre (PT)

- umbrella term for related techniques, among which is Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO) (Boal, 1979)
- collective process of theatre that identifies and engages participants (i.e., youth, families and communities) in discussion of issues with intention of personal and social transformation (Conrad, 2004)
- The TO process moves towards liberation, transforming a passive spectator of the theatrical phenomenon into an active protagonist who changes the “*dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change - in short, trains himself for real action*” (Boal, 2008, p. 122)

Intervention Objectives & Question

To develop a knowledge base around PT for Indigenous youth mental wellness, the project aims to:

- detail the distinct phases of youth engagement over a series of multi-week PT interventions;
- support youth engagement through facilitator-training workshops & dialogue;
- prepare for community engagement with PT through the development of a youth-driven performance

Overarching evaluation research question is:

How might a Popular Theatre-based primary prevention model promote community strengths and community-based solutions for youth wellness?

Youth Intervention

Build Drama Skills

Youth Workshop

Generate Scenarios

Prepare Performance



Performance

Youth Perform

Joker Facilitates Audience Engagement



Sustained Multi-Level Transformation

Youth

Service Providers

Community Capacity

2015 & 2017 Pilots

- Partnership with a Blackfoot Health Services Centre in Southern Alberta
- Explored PT with two groups of youth aged 14 to 20 years meeting 2-4 times a week over 4-5 months each
- Workshops facilitated by a Blackfoot suicide prevention coordinator trained in theatre methods

2015 & 2017 Pilots

- Youth process prompted by asking youth to identify what a life lived well would mean for them, exploring what gets in the way of reaching their goals
- Aimed to empower youth to reflect upon their life experiences, and to interrogate the social context of their lives, while acting and re-acting to different dramatic solutions for social action
- Worked towards collective development of scenes culminating with unresolved storylines that represented key issues in the lives of participating youth

Evaluation Approach

- To evaluate the impact of the PT intervention written pre/post survey with Indigenous youth participants and a corresponding qualitative process are employed
- Pre/post survey measured: Control; Social Support; Stress; Depression and Positive affect
- Evaluation tools developed through Nominal Group Technique lead by a Blackfoot physician researcher

Formative Findings

- In 2015, a group young men developed a story centred around substance abuse, peer-pressure, gang involvement, family tension, and exposure to violence and insecurity
- In 2017, a mixed gender group developed a scene about a school situation involving issues of authority, nepotism, discrimination, and a poor educational system

2015: the youth performed in front of peers at a local school

2017: culminated in a youth performance in front of over 100 of their peers.

Formative Findings

- Participants reported that the workshop process was more impactful for them than the final performance
- All (n=14) 2017 participants finished the pre-workshop survey; 9 completed post-workshop survey
- Participants perceived improvement in abilities to cope with life adversities. However, our interpretation of the quantitative results is limited by a small sample size and constrained timeframe

Formative Findings: Evaluation Tools

These are some questions about things that sometimes happen to people. Please circle to what extent you agree with the statements (questions 1-17), how well they describe your behavior (questions 18-21), to what extent they describe you now or within the past 2 weeks (questions 22 & 23), and to what extent they describe you now (questions 24-31).

Consider to what extent you agree with the following statements			
1	I can solve many of the problems I have on my own	Not at all	Somewhat A lot
2	I can change many of the important things in my life	Not at all	Somewhat A lot
3	I do well even when things are tough	Not at all	Somewhat A lot
4	What happens to me mostly depends on me	Not at all	Somewhat A lot
5	I can do just about anything I really set my mind to do	Not at all	Somewhat A lot

Consider to what extent you agree with the following statements							
	Very Strongly Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Neutral	Mildly Agree	Strongly Agree	Very Strongly Agree
6	There is a special person who is around when I am in need.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
7	There is a special person with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
8	My family really tries to help me.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
9	I get the emotional help and support I need from my family.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
10	I have a special person who is a real source of comfort to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
11	My friends really try to help me.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
12	I can count on my friends when things go wrong.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
13	I can talk about my problems with my family.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
14	I have friends with whom I can share my joys and sorrows.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
15	There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7
16	My family is willing to help me make decisions.	1	2	3	4	5	6 7

17	I can talk about my problems with my friends.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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Consider how well the following statements describe your behavior and actions on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means the statement does not describe you at all and 5 means it describes you very well

18	I look for creative ways to alter difficult situations.	1	2	3	4	5
19	Regardless of what happens to me, I believe I can control my reaction to it.	1	2	3	4	5
20	I believe I can grow in positive ways by dealing with difficult situations.	1	2	3	4	5
21	I actively look for ways to replace the losses I encounter in life.	1	2	3	4	5

Over the past 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?

22	Little interest or pleasure in doing things	Not at all	Several days	More than half the days	Nearly every day
23	Feeling down, depressed or hopeless	Not at all	Several days	More than half the days	Nearly every day

Consider to what extent the following statement describes you

24	You are a good family member to your family	Not much	Sometimes	Fair bit	Lots of times
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The following questions ask how happy you feel, using a scale from zero to 10. Zero means you feel VERY SAD. 10 means you feel VERY HAPPY. And in middle of the scale is 5, which means you feel NOT HAPPY OR SAD.

25	How happy are you about the things that you have? Like Money you have and things you own?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
26	How happy are you with your health?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
27	How happy are you with the things you want to be good at?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
28	How happy are you about getting along with the people you know?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
29	How happy are you with how safe you feel?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
30	How happy are you about doing things outside of your home?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
31	How happy are you about what may happen to you later on in your life?	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Contact: Lynden (Lindsay) Crowshoe - crowshoe@ucalgary.ca

Implications for Policy and Practice

- stirs opportunity for creative, community-based dialogue around topics identified by youth as important for their wellness
- offers a creative process for informing policy makers and service providers about issues of importance in the lives of youth
- can be inclusive of all community members and adaptable to Indigenous knowledge and principles
- is a relevant strategy for the understudied area of primary suicide prevention; offers means of promoting health and self-efficacy through a collaborative, arts-based approach grounded in local realities

Future Research & Activities

2018 First
Nation and
urban
collaborations

Forum Theatre
method capacity
building

Thank you

- Rita Henderson (rihender@ucalgary.ca)
- Lindsay Crowshoe (crowshoe@ucalgary.ca)

