

The Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being

Le rôle des arts pour améliorer de la santé et le bien-être

Benjamin Bolden

Abstract: This article details selected findings of the World Health Organization’s 2019 report on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being. The author illuminates these findings with personal stories of arts engagement supporting health outcomes.

Résumé : Cet article détaille certains résultats du rapport 2019 de l’Organisation mondiale de la santé à propos du rôle des arts pour améliorer la santé et le bien-être. L’auteur illustre ces constats par des histoires personnelles au sujet de l’impact de l’engagement artistique sur la santé.

In December 2021, I was sitting in a circle with my class of pre-service music teacher candidates trying to figure out what we should do. To sing or not to sing? That was the question.

The Omicron Covid-19 variant had reared up and dashed our tentative hopes that the pandemic was over. We were all feeling a renewed sense of anxiety about contaminated flying air particles. I remember someone saying, “Well, on one hand, I’m worried about singing, because of the risk of spreading Covid. On the other hand, I think singing together does us all an awful lot of good.”

These words made me feel like crying. Because they described exactly what so many of us were in anguish about—in that class and indeed in music communities all over the world. We were trying to deal with the recognition that the music making we craved was simultaneously good for us but also dangerous. How to negotiate this conundrum? How to walk this tightrope?

Even though the pandemic rendered it dangerous, making music, of course, *is* good for us and powerfully so.

It’s good for us when we do it alone, but even better when we do it with others. In fact, all kinds of arts activities are good for us, in all kinds of ways. Research has proven it.

Unpacking the Evidence

In 2019 the World Health Organization (WHO) published a report synthesizing evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being. The report reviewed over 900 publications released between 2000 and 2019, including research reports, reviews, systematic reviews, meta-analyses and meta-syntheses. In this article I provide some snapshots of the report. I also share a few stories from my own experiences that bring some of the report’s findings to life.

The WHO’s report details a wealth of evidence that the arts *do* improve health and well-being, positively impacting both physical and mental health. The authors identified 10 clusters of findings—10 *ways* the arts improve health. Three of these clusters struck me as particularly relevant to the work arts teachers do with learners in schools and communities.

1. The arts affect social determinants of health (supporting social cohesion and inclusion and working against social inequities)
2. The arts support child development (including mother–infant bonding, speech and language acquisition, and educational attainment).
3. The arts help to prevent ill health (enhancing well-being and mental health and reducing the impact of trauma, and reducing the risk of cognitive decline, frailty and premature mortality)

The Arts Affect Social Determinants of Health

When I was a teenager, Kurt, small and frail, wandered through my high school looking lost, terrified, and alone. He desperately hoped no one would notice him and shut

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him up in a locker. I don't know how he found the courage, but one day he took a leap and signed up for the school musical. Kurt came to rehearsals—faithfully.

There was no magical transformation. Kurt did not become high school prom king. But he *did* have people who said “hi” to him when they passed him in the hall. He had somewhere to go after school where he was welcomed and accepted. He had people to laugh with, and eventually to take a bow with when peers, parents, and community members leapt to their feet at the curtain call. And Kurt had fellow performers to feel sad with when the final show was over.

Social determinants of health are the non-medical factors that influence health outcomes. Social cohesion is one such determinant. It refers to an individual's network of relationships and inclusion within a community. Social cohesion is a social determinant of health because people are healthier when they are not alone.

The arts give young people opportunities and reasons to come together and experience a shared sense of success, physical coordination, shared attention, shared motivation, and group identity—to bond. And, we are stronger together.

The Arts Support Child Development

A while ago I did some field research at an inner-city school in Toronto. There were a lot of students with a lot of challenges. These students were labelled “at risk”—at risk of dropping out, and at risk of a lot else, too. I was researching the work of a music teacher, Sam, who had found a way to reach these students with a class that had them composing and songwriting with digital audio workstations.

I asked the principal to offer her perspective on Sam's program. “I don't know how he does it,” she said, “but he's got kids showing up for that class who won't set foot anywhere else in the building... and a lot more who only come to school *because* of that class.”

One way the arts support child development is by giving young people a reason to go to school, and to *stay* in school, thereby supporting educational attainment.

Well-educated people tend to experience better health, as indicated in self-reported health measures and low levels of disability, morbidity, and mortality. Low educational attainment, on the other hand, is associated with self-reports of poor health, increased suffering from illness, and shorter life expectancy (Raghupathi & Raghupathi, 2020). The arts can support child development, and consequently health, by keeping young people in school.

The Arts Prevent Ill Health By Enhancing Well-Being

I have a fourteen-year-old son named Max. He is not a joiner. He does not want to play hockey, or football. He has no interest—much to my chagrin—in singing in a choir or acting in a play. What *Max* loves to do is draw. He draws whimsical images of teacup people with mushrooms growing out of their heads. It makes him happy and when he completes an image that he likes he posts it and feels good about it. For Max, drawing is a meaningful activity that gives him a sense of control, autonomy, and purpose. It helped get him through the pandemic.

There are many connections between mental and physical health. For instance, poor mental health is a risk factor for chronic physical conditions (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2022). The arts help to prevent ill health by enhancing well-being and mental health. Arts engagement in adolescence can contribute to reducing the risk of mental illness such as depression (Fancourt & Steptoe, 2018). Research has identified that arts engagement can promote multidimensional subjective well-being, including affective well-being (positive emotions in our daily lives), evaluative well-being (our life satisfaction), and eudemonic well-being (our sense of meaning, control, autonomy and purpose) (Fancourt & Finn, 2019).

Final Words

I have shared in this article just a few of the findings of the World Health Organization's 2019 report on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being. I highlighted these particular points because I have seen the associated mechanisms at work. I shared relevant stories in the hope they would resonate with you, or better yet, remind you of some of your own stories and experiences—some of the ways you have seen the tremendous power of the arts for healing, health, and wellness.

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