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ART, CULTURE, AND THE MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE

by MARTINA CAROLEO* and ANNALISA CICERCHIA**

Summary

Even before the outbreak of the pandemic, the growing fragility of mental health, especially among the younger population, was high on the priorities of many countries, in Europe and worldwide. With the advent of the pandemic and the subsequent adoption of necessary preventive measures, including isolation, there has been a significant increase in anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts among young people. The pandemic scar was then compounded by the effects of the war in Ukraine and environmental concerns. Several artistic and cultural projects have tried to respond to this call for help. Due to their low entry threshold and their informal and innovative nature, they can intercept young people and young people who escape conventional and formal support and care networks. The European Commission's Voices of Culture structured dialogue platform invited participants from 53 organisations, selected through a public call, from 23 countries in the fields of culture, health, education, and social services for a brainstorming session in October 2022 in Brussels. This meeting gave rise to recommendations that see as central the need for the various fields (social, clinical, artistic) to work together in order to structure comprehensive and more effective interventions.

Keywords: Mental health, Culture and well-being, Cultural sectors, Integrated health policies.

JEL code: D91, Z1

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1. An emerging field of investigation and experimentation

Since the mid-1990s, the growing scholarly activity on the impact of culture and the arts on health and well-being has given rise to a substantial body of knowledge, and a plurality of intensive, if often intermittent, practices in the field.

Over the last two decades, projects, experiences, and experiments have multiplied in the arts and culture sectors, and numerous scholars have engaged in the collection and analysis of data, aware of the need to build up an increasingly solid body of evidence.

The first large longitudinal study (Bygren *et al.*, 1996) found a significant correspondence between a rich and vibrant cultural life and a more favorable life expectancy: a longer, healthier life.

The obvious differences in access to and intensity of cultural practice, linked to income, education levels, residence, etc., have inspired theoretical and practical initiatives aimed at reducing the gaps and making the benefits of culture and the arts available also to those who, due to disadvantaged economic and social conditions, cannot ordinarily benefit from them.

After many years of intense experimentation and analysis, mostly fragmented and scattered, in 2019 the WHO intervened authoritatively, publishing the first scoping review (Fancourt and Finn, 2019) of over 3,000 studies and research reports on the effects of participation in the performing arts, visual arts, literature and involvement in culture and heritage on people's health and well-being.

Some of these studies describe the effect of artistic interventions targeted at different clinical needs (e.g., mental illness, neurodevelopmental and neurological disorders, non-communicable diseases, acute conditions requiring hospital care, and end-of-life care). The scoping review also highlighted the existence of data showing associations at the general population level between involvement in the arts and reduced incidence of diseases (including depression, chronic diseases, and age-related decline). Overall, the report concluded that the arts could play a key role in the promotion (e.g., with appropriate language to support health literacy, from school age) of good health, prevention, management, and treatment of a range of different disease conditions (WHO, 2021).

2. Supporting the mental health of young people

Art and culture projects that successfully address the specific problem of young people's mental health are numerous and are usually co-designed by experts from different fields (sociology, health, anthropology, culture, art), tested, and validated in a wide variety of contexts. They differ greatly in the art forms they adopt and in the way they are performed and participated.

From theatres to museums, from music to the visual arts, from video making to photography, from reading and writing to dance, all the arts have shown that they can contribute to:

- promote mental health and well-being,
- prevent mental disorders and illnesses,
- manage pathological conditions,
- treating mental disorders and illnesses.

Among the most successful experiences, for mental health Fancourt and Finn report community arts programmes. They underline that «the aesthetic and emotional components of art activities can provide opportunities for emotional expression, emotion regulation, and stress reduction. Emotion regulation is intrinsic to how we manage our mental health. (...) Cognitive stimulation when engaging in the arts can provide opportunities for learning and skills development, and it is (...) interrelated with mental illness such as depression». They also note that social interaction while participating in the arts can reduce loneliness and lack of social support, which are both linked with adverse physiological responses and mental illness. Bringing together different groups of people, social interaction while participating in the arts can improve social capital and reduce discrimination, which is linked with mental illness (Fancourt and Finn, 2019).

3. Young people's mental health, between new needs and old scars

From 2020 onwards, the context has become more complicated and loaded with crisis elements. European (and world) data describe the explosion of unease and suffering among the youngest. An e-survey by Eurofound in 2021 showed that mental well-being had reached its lowest level across all age groups since the onset of the pandemic, with one of the biggest drops in well-being among young people. Fears, anxiety, sleep, and eating disorders, self-harm, and a tendency to social withdrawal are increasingly common. In addition to the intensification of phenomena such as bullying and cyber-bullying – a 2019 UNESCO study indicates that 32% of the world's youth population is a victim of this, and young people with disabilities are particularly affected – there is also what is now called the 'pandemic scar'. In addition to the post-traumatic stress that affects young migrants to a large extent, there are also the worries generated by the environmental crisis and war among adolescents and even children.

4. The response of the cultural sectors and the Structured Dialogue

The response of the European cultural sectors and their operators to the call for help from children, adolescents and young people has been

generous, with an interpretation of the crisis that has also seen in it an opportunity. This has led actors in the field to reorganise and redeploy their resources to look for new ways to contribute more effectively to improving the mental health of young people.

Although there is still a lack of vision on the part of many instances of politics and the health and social sector, the essential and systemic role that culture and the arts play in our society is beginning to be recognised in important fora. The European Commission, through its Directorate-General for Education, Culture, Sport, and Youth, called upon cultural sector organisations in June 2022 to take stock of their contribution to the growing demand for interventions to protect the mental health of young people. In order to gather insights, experiences and recommendations on this topic from civil society across Europe, the European Commission's *Voices of Culture* structured dialogue platform invited participants from 53 organisations selected through a public call, from 23 countries, in the fields of culture, health, education, and social services, for a brainstorming session in October 2022 in Brussels. The meeting was followed by two months of research work to produce a report with analyses and recommendations for policy-makers and cultural sector organisations.

5. *Voices of Culture*: the analysis

The picture that emerged is rich and lively. The cultural sectors are sensitive to the demand for help and have drawn with great generosity on their resources of creativity and inventiveness, with an offer closer to the everyday experience of young people than the more formal one of health institutions. However, the fragmentation of organisations, the lack of shared strategic orientations, the tendency of initiatives to remain small-scale and local, fragile in the continuity of resources, and still not sufficiently capable of defining, acquiring, and sharing the necessary skills and competencies still severely limit the scope of their contribution to the mental health of the youngest.

Academically, the role of the arts in mental health is still little investigated, as there are very few studies with large cohorts of participants. There are even fewer works investigating the psychological effects of the arts on young people. In contrast, there are many case studies of small groups that record the experience of young participants through empirical and qualitative research, often in anecdotal form, by means of questionnaires, interviews, or focus groups, and which indisputably confirm the positive impact of the arts on young people.

With reference to the four-part division of the main areas of impact of culture on health and well-being proposed by the WHO Report (Fancourt and Finn, 2019), arts programmes for young people respond well especially in the areas of mental health promotion and prevention.

In fact, their emerging capacity is to provide elements of literacy, to build resilience, to support empowerment processes, to foster the search for meaning and to reconstruct weak or broken bonds of sociality.

The arts can help prevent a crisis from becoming uncontrollable. The provision of arts activities, systematically offered as an early intervention, can help counter and defuse the stigma attached to mental disorders. Culture and the arts can be decisive in the process of raising public awareness of mental health problems, contributing to their acceptance, and de-stigmatising them. A strategic aspect, addressed several times in the *Voices of Culture* process on the contribution of the cultural sectors to the mental health of young people, is the complexity of cross-sectoral relationships that need to be activated and strengthened to increase the desired impact.

These factors and their complex relationships were analysed to also understand the degrees of influence between the stakeholders, based on their institutional proximity and the different types of youth support they offer and could offer. The map in Fig. 1 gives an idea of cross-sectoral collaboration and suggests how structural relations could be re-imagined.

The diagram arranges the stakeholders according to their different degrees of power to intervene and impact and interest. In the representation, young people, health professionals, cultural institutions and artists are given a high level of interest, but a still low power of intervention.

However, the cultural sectors have proven to be able to apply their expertise to generate strategic impacts: engaging audiences, stimulating imagination and reflection, building identity and community, creating safe spaces within which sensitive and sometimes embarrassing issues can be addressed, and more.

Fig. 2. proposes a schematic representation, from an ecosystem perspective, of the integration of mental health into all policies and of multi-sectoral cooperation to mobilise the knowledge and practice resources of the cultural and creative sectors at multiple institutional levels to support the mental health of young people.

Any innovative framework for the integration of culture and creativity across sectors and dimensions of well-being will naturally have to organise stakeholders according to their spheres of influence – local, regional, global. Local stakeholders are those who have direct contact with the target group, including carers, friends, health workers, teachers, etc. Organisations that influence policymaking and resource distribution operate at the regional level, and it is here that alliances between the cultural, health and social sectors can be promoted.

Finally, in the outermost ring of the ecosystem are the global networks of institutions acting to promote deeper, broader, and more coherent change. The diagram also takes into account the fact that some actors cut across spheres of influence, such as communication and

social media, the marketplace, etc. These influences between spheres may pose barriers to collaboration as much as they represent opportunities for collaborative partnerships.

6. Recommendations

Among the many suggestions and policy recommendations made in the *Voices of Culture* Report, the following topics deserve attention for their strategic and operational potential.

- a) A concerted effort is needed from the cultural, health, and social sectors to raise awareness of the role of the arts on young people's mental health and make full use of this resource.
- b) Access to culture and creative participation must be made easy and inclusive, to reach and involve young people from disadvantaged groups.
- c) International exchanges of experience and knowledge are beneficial in establishing a solid basis for the role of culture and the arts in promoting and defending the mental health of young people.
- d) In the design of programmes, actions, and policies, the evaluation must be seen as a fully integrated process in the project, from start to finish, and requires a multidisciplinary approach, integrating a variety of perspectives.
- e) The practice of social prescribing as a primary care intervention could help integrate the arts into public policies for health and mental health specifically.
- f) Interventions targeting young people should involve the beneficiaries at every stage, from planning to implementation.

7. Looking ahead

The first two key findings of the Flash Eurobarometer on *Youth and Democracy in the European Year of Youth*, reporting Youth's views on the European Year of Youth are:

- Young people think the European Year of Youth should focus on improving mental and physical health and well-being, protecting the environment, and fighting climate change (both 34%), improving education and training, including the free movement of students, apprentices, pupils, etc. (33%), and fighting poverty and economic and social inequalities (32%).
- Improving young people's mental and physical health and well-being is considered the (shared) most important priority theme for the European Year of Youth in 16 of the 27 Member States. Proportionally, improving mental and physical health and well-being is considered a priority for the European Year of Youth by between 26% of respondents in Germany and 56% in Estonia». (European Commission 2022a).

The topic is considered particularly relevant among young women, 38% of whom found that improving mental and physical health and well-being should be a priority theme. The corresponding share of young men was 30%.

Mental health has been emphasised in a variety of sectoral dialogues of the European Commission with citizens, as well as in the European Year of Youth. The OECD (2018) estimates that the direct and indirect costs of poor mental health exceed 4% of GDP. These costs – underlines the Commission – «are on top of the more intangible costs of emotional distress, pain and suffering experienced by those with an enduring mental illness, as well as by those close to them and healthcare professionals attending to them». Therefore, «Investing in improving people’s mental health is not only about health; it is about ensuring that European society is citizen-centred, resilient, and cohesive. (...) to effectively reduce human suffering and bring benefits to our societies and economies, EU action needs to go beyond health policy and include all policies with an impact on mental health». (European Commission 2023). A comprehensive approach to mental health is included in the Commission’s work programme for 2023 under the priority ‘promoting our European way of life’: «The Commission will respond to another proposal from the Conference on the Future of Europe with a comprehensive approach to mental health, a major societal issue brought into extra focus during the pandemic. The Commission will also continue to promote sport and the mental and physical benefits of a healthy lifestyle across society and across generations, building on the HealthyLifestyle4All initiative and its Youth Ideas Labs» (European Commission 2022b).

Confirming the correctness of the directions proposed by the Voices of Culture final report comes an authoritative article published in the February 2023 issue of *Lancet Public Health* (Dow *et al.*, 2023). Four researchers from University College of London examined around 200 examples of arts and health policy initiatives from different governmental areas, such as health, arts, local government, and cross-sectoral and cross-cutting settings. Their analysis shows that, although there is still a very general view of the relationship between artistic endeavour and health improvement, decision-makers have begun to invest in targeted applications of the arts to address specific public health problems. The most promising and concrete experiences occur when the sectors (ministries, agencies, institutions, etc.) of health and those of art and culture work together on policy development.

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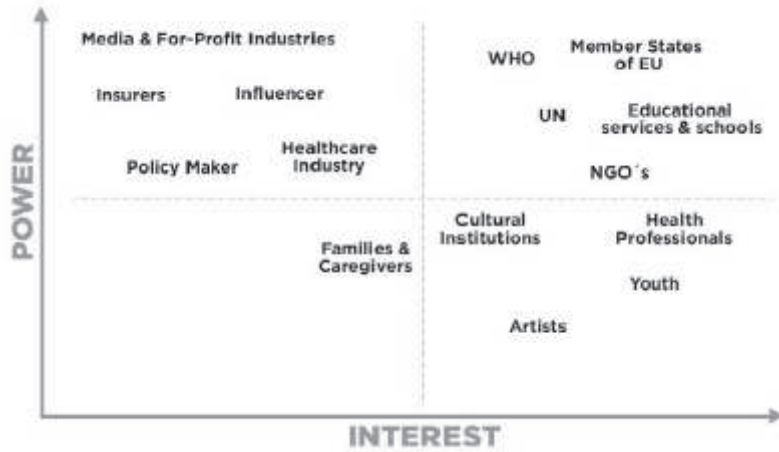


FIG. 1 – dal Brainstorming Report VoC 2022

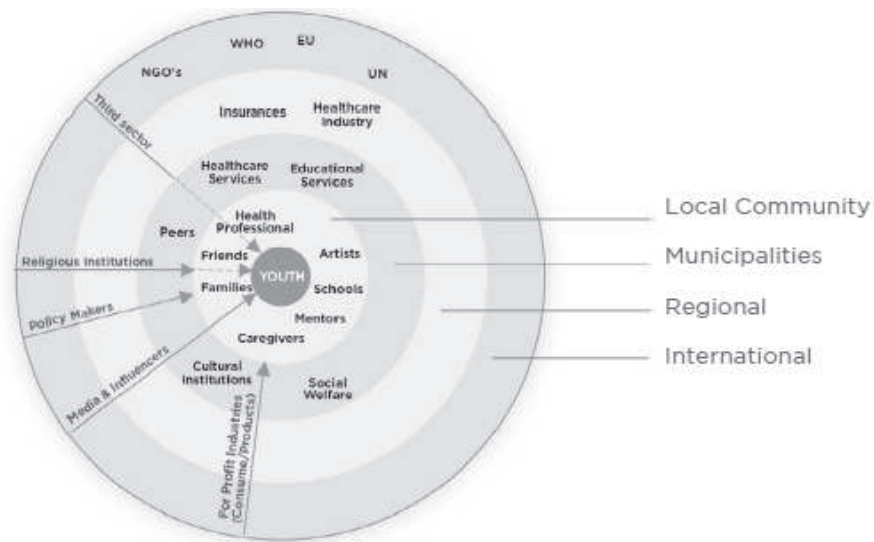


FIG. 2 – dal Brainstorming Report VoC 2022

