



Next-Generation Leaders
for Global Good

Championing Local Health in Kenya - An Immersive Cultural Experience to Qualitatively

Understand Healthcare Experiences Through Art

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Leadership-in-Action Project

Laidlaw Leadership and Research Scholarship

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Introduction

As health studies scholarship inclines away from a biomedical model of health and instead towards a nuanced understanding of the social determinants of health, it is important to recognize the role played by nutrition, social cohesion, education, a sense of belonging and many more in the overall wellness of an individual. This speaks to the need for a perspective that understands the interplay of various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined by the UN.

Moreover, the growing recognition for the field of Health Humanities provides a concrete basis for the integration of art in all shape and form to enhance health inquiry and health practices that focus on each community's unique strengths and needs. Thus, this LiA project aimed to contribute to community-based health practices by examining social factors that affect the wellness of the locals by collaboratively engaging in arts-based interventions that foster strong interpersonal relations and transparent conversations.

About KULE Foundation International

KULE Foundation is an internationally recognized non-profit organization operating in Kenya and Uganda. The foundation focuses on enhancing the quality of education and healthcare by training staff, fostering community engagement, and building global partnerships.

SMART Goals

- To work with the people of Mukangu village for two weeks to learn basic Swahili and Kikuyu, build community connections, understand issues faced by them and co-create tangible solutions to address these issues

- To work with schools in Mukangu village and Kambirwa village for two weeks to build a sense of community among students and work alongside teachers to incorporate arts-based methodologies into their curricula
- To interact with women in Mukangu village and Kambirwa village to understand the aspect of health that needs more awareness and tailor an outreach initiative that sparks conversation and breaks stereotypes

People of Mukangu

Mukangu Village is situated within Murang'a, and houses a community of people called "the Kikuyu", owing to the local language called Kikuyu. The non-profit, KULE Foundation, is also based in this village. Upon consulting the people of Mukangu, I learnt that transport and access to education were two main problems faced by the community.

Bus Stop

The people were inconvenienced by the absence of a shady place to stay at while waiting for the main bus that goes all the way to Nairobi. I worked alongside the villagers in the process of building a bus stop. It was a sustainable initiative "from Mukangu to Mukangu", as the raw materials were sourced from surrounding areas. By harnessing the power of the community, the construction was completed in two days and was ready to use by the third day.



Primary School

Another issue faced by the community was the absence of a primary school in the neighborhood, because of which students had to travel a great deal every day for school. The non-profit recently started a primary school in the vicinity, whose construction is close to completion. I assisted in the construction of a school pavement, a garden and a foundation for a water tank.

A challenge I encountered in these projects was the intensity of physical work that I was not prepared for or accustomed to. It was inspiring to see the people of the village work smoothly and seamlessly, and their words of encouragement truly helped me do my little part towards improving their access to transport and education.



Students in Mukangu Village and Kambirwa Village

Roko 20 Academy - Located in Kambirwa Village, Roko 20 Academy has students from Kindergarten until Grade 6, with a total of around 300 students. 18 students reside in the dormitory located in the school premises. All 300 students come from homes that have a backdrop of domestic violence, substance abuse and in some cases, extreme poverty. Exhibition of aggression, verbal and physical, were observed when the students interacted with each other in classrooms and playgrounds respectively.

Shalom Academy - Run by a retired Reverend, this school teaches children from Kindergarten until Grade 8 and is located in Kahuhia. Similar to Roko 20 academy, this school also takes in about 150 students from underprivileged backgrounds.

Mukangu Secondary School - Located in Mukangu village, this school teaches around 400 students from Grade 9 to Grade 12 (called “Form 1 through 4” respectively).

Mukangu Primary School - Located in Mukangu Village, this school teaches children from kindergarten until Grade 8, adding up to a total of around 450 students.

Upon discussion with teachers from these schools, it became clear that the curricula lacked creative education and rather focused on more rote forms of learning. We collectively agreed to come up with a series of workshops focusing on boosting students' creativity using arts-based methods, as well as fostering leadership education.

Photovoice Narratives

This activity included two components:

Activity 1: Encouraging students to take meaningful photographs of their surroundings and reflect on them (Prompt: "What do you like about your school?")

Activity 2: Encouraging students to think outside the box to interpret standalone photographs/series of photographs to weave a story - students were asked to narrates story based on one photograph, then asked to narrate a story based on a series of photographs



Table 1. Photovoice Narratives Activity 1 Engagement

Student Group	Activity Time	Total Number of Students	Number Engaged Students	of	% Engagement
ROKO 20 Academy Grade 4	1 hr*	16**	3		18.75
Mukangu Secondary School Form 1A	1 hr	30	2		6.67

*1 hr spent for activity, 1 hr spent on keeping students engaged through cultural exchange

**Best estimate

Table 2. Photovoice Narratives Activity 2 Engagement

Student Group	Activity Time	Total Number of Students	Number Engaged Students	of	% Engagement
ROKO 20 Academy Grade 5	1 hr	12	3		25
ROKO 20 Academy Grade 6	1 hr	18	15		83.33
Mukangu Secondary School Form 1C	1 hr	30	2		6.67
Shalom Academy	30 min	20**	2		10

**Best estimate

Activity 1: Students, particularly from Grade 9 (Form 1A) and Grade 4, were more focused on taking photos of each other rather than engaging with the guiding prompts. Grade 9 students were better at explaining the significance of their photographs compared to Grade 4 students, who were more challenging to engage due to differences in age, school, and English proficiency.

Activity 2: Students performed better when provided with a story example and a structured rubric outlining the requirements for their stories, such as including titles, characters, places, animals, and things. Grade 6 and Grade 9 students outperformed Grade 5 students.

What went well: About 25.07% of participants experienced a spark in creativity. The activities fostered conversations on the benefits of photography and the limitless nature of imagination and creativity in storytelling. Positive reinforcement was used effectively, including applause, certificates, and prizes for exceptional participation. For Grade 6 students at ROKO 20 Academy, an inclusive approach was adopted by awarding a certificate to the entire class. The concept of “inclusion checks”, inspired by fellow Laidlaw Scholar Youness Robert-Tahiri, was introduced to ensure equal participation and sharing of resources.

Challenges: Language barriers and variations in English proficiency among the students made it difficult to engage students. The educational nature of the activity posed challenges in maintaining students' attention for longer periods. Moving forward, starting with an energizing or trust-building activity, clearly explaining story and narrative structures, interacting more with student groups to workshop their stories, and ensuring sustainable creativity by consistently exposing students to visual arts throughout the year could enhance future activities.

The teachers have agreed to incorporate these exercises into their curricula to make creative learning something that is consistent and ongoing.

Dance and Music Cultural Exchange

Dance and music are a powerful form of not just cultural expression but also self-expression. The students and I engaged in an exchange of music and dance from our cultures to improve social cohesion and enhance cultural competence.

This exercise also helped address stereotypes and promote a more nuanced understanding of cultures. I made an effort to be mindful about the fine line between cultural appropriation and appreciation at each stage. Seeing that the students thoroughly enjoyed dance and music, the teachers and I worked towards adding a time slot for this in their timetable for the upcoming semester.

Emotional Intelligence and Career Counseling

Cultivating awareness around emotions and emotional intelligence helps create self-awareness and also builds mindful practices around identifying and managing one's emotions. I had conversations with students about the difference between emotions and feelings, physical expression of different emotions, when certain emotions might be triggered, what feelings could be elicited by different emotions, how emotions show up in interpersonal interactions, labeling and managing one's emotions and journaling. We also discussed ways in which these learnings could be expanded to the context of finding one's passions and possible career paths.

Initially, it was very difficult to gather and sustain students' attention, given the nature of the activity. From time to time, they were also hesitant to share their views and thoughts. I altered my approach and added a bit of humor, which led to better engagement. The teachers

agreed to check in with students regularly to reiterate the importance of journaling and also provide a safe space for students who need support working through their emotions regarding careers.

Mural Art

Artwork surely does brighten up a place, and it is a tool that can also foster connections and a sense of belonging if used correctly. At the Mukangu Secondary School, I noticed that artwork co-created with students could add value. Thus, I pioneered a mural project, which would have contributions from every student.

The final result was a tree painted on one of the school walls, with the leaves made up of each student's handprint. This project was loved by one and all. They were excited to take part in a project of this scale, which gave them the confidence that they are capable of big things. They also felt a novel sense of connection with the school.

One major challenge was planning and executing this in a short period of time. I learnt to delegate and leverage the expertise of others to make the most of the available time and resources. The Principal was mighty impressed, and said that the school will make time for such projects in the future, upon seeing the extensive positives created by this one.



Women

Upon interacting with families in Murang'a County, I was surprised to learn that most children had their mothers' names as their last names. My surprise was short-lived when I was told the reason behind this, which was that most mothers are single moms, whose husbands usually leave the families to fend for themselves. The burdening responsibilities entailed by them being single parents were evident in the conversations that I had. I was curious to unpack the underlying complexities. I realized that using arts-based modalities would make such sensitive conversations a tad easier.

As someone who is passionate about visual representations through art, I was inclined towards creating a documentary to capture the stories of these women. I consulted with a woman, whom we shall call Mrs L, from Mukangu village, in order to understand the themes that exist around the topic of women's health. Mrs L told me about a recent incident wherein a mother of three children died by suicide, which she attributed to a lack of awareness and support surrounding women's mental health. Additionally, she mentioned that some women might not be comfortable showing their faces on camera for a documentary, so we jointly decided that it

would be a podcast focusing on capturing women's narratives and experiences regarding mental health.

I interviewed a total of 19 individuals residing in the villages of Mukangu and Kambirwa. More than 50% of these women spoke little English and were fluent in either one or both of Swahili and Kikuyu. Two men who used to work at the school that I stayed at during my last three weeks (let us call them Mr J and Mr P), helped me conduct the interviews in the local languages. Prior to these interviews, I had a session with Mr J and Mr P to ensure that we were all on the same page about the interview protocol. It was interesting to learn about cultural components underlying conversational structures, and to revise the protocol accordingly. At every interview, I would begin by making an effort to establish a rapport with the women by using basic Swahili and Kikuyu phrases that I had picked up, and by sharing anecdotes from my lived experiences that helped us connect and find common ground.

Drawing upon the concepts I learned in some of my Health Humanities courses, the conception of "consent" in these contexts was the backdrop of my thought process while planning and executing the podcast idea. Initially, I had planned to disseminate the podcast among the Laidlaw scholars and my academic networks, since the possibility of distributing it among the women who had little to no access to technology was rendered moot. However, I soon realized the importance of the project's outcomes going back to the community. In all the conversations that I had with the women, the common trend observed was the need for a support group. Thus, I took the initiative of establishing a Women's Collective to cultivate dialogue on mental health.

Women's Collective

In communities where topics such as mental health are taboo, I was worried that asking questions about it could trigger a fight-or-flight response. I was surprised to learn that it, in fact, had the opposite effect. Apparently, asking questions that have not been asked before could be liberating for some people. Similarly, when voices come together and coalesce, they have the potential to create a powerful and safe space. Keeping this in mind, I designed the structure for the workshop. The latter began with an icebreaker where everyone was asked to introduce themselves by saying their name, how old they are, where they are from, and show their favorite dance move. My co-hosts, Miss L and Mrs J translated my points every now and then to overcome language barriers. After the ice breaker, I wanted to give out little cards that I had made for them, each with a powerful self-love quote in Swahili. I read out each quote and the women had to raise their hands if they resonated with said quote. This way, an effort was made to connect with the participants on a deeper level. Next, the women were paired up and one person in each group had 90 seconds to share an anecdote from their lives that they were proud of, following which their partner would tell the room what strengths were identifiable in their partner's anecdote. The aim of this exercise was to validate each other's experiences and repeat their strengths back to them. After this exercise, the participants were asked to use the back side of the cards and draw their emotions. Following this, the participants were asked to recall everyone's names and strengths. A reflection component followed, wherein each participant narrated their views before and after the workshop, and provided reflections. The workshop concluded with a meditation exercise to inculcate mindfulness.

The workshop was emotionally intense for many participants. There were tears of joy every now and then. The participants expressed that they felt heard, seen, validated and

connected. Miss ML said, “I feel like a huge weight has been lifted off my chest”. Mrs PW said, “At the age of 88, I have learnt so much from all of you, and I am glad to have made so many friends.” Miss PM said, “I feel like I finally have people with whom I can share my troubles.” The coming together of voices that empowered one another led to the co-creation of a powerful and safe space for intentional and intimate conversation.

Based on this feedback, I asked all of them to pass their cards around and write their names and phone numbers so that they can be in touch. Furthermore, I discussed the possibility of this Collective meeting on a monthly basis to keep the conversation going, to which they agreed enthusiastically. I will be liaising with Miss L and Mrs J who helped me co-host the workshop, to plan and host similar workshops on a monthly basis. The participants will be asked for their feedback consistently in order to enhance the effectiveness of these workshops and the overall beneficence of the collective.

One main challenge during this project was navigating my positionality. As someone who is not as old as the participants and lacking in similar lived experiences, I was afraid that I might fail in my attempts to decolonize community-based work - I did not want to be an outsider dictating what has to be done according to perceived “best interests” of the community. To me, building a connection with each participant was of paramount importance. I drew upon my views on the lived experiences of my mother which were comparable to those of these women, in order to reiterate my passion, which was to enable voices to be heard and validated. Thus, a shared sense of community and connection transcended language barriers. I will be joining the monthly sessions virtually in order to help facilitate them and also keep the connection going.

