



NIHR Global Health Research Group on improving asthma outcomes in African children at Queen Mary University of London

17/63/38

To find out more about their research, visit:

<https://fundingawards.nihr.ac.uk/award/17/63/38>



**UK International
Development**

Partnership | Progress | Prosperity





NIHR CEI Impact Showcase

Using Theatre to Transform Understanding and Attitudes about Asthma in African Adolescents

Presented as part of the ACACIA study

Dr Gioia Mosler, Head of Global Health Group and Community Engagement

Queen Mary University of London

Asthma:

- Sub-Saharan African countries currently face a severe asthma crisis, with about 1 in 10 adolescents suffering from asthma symptoms¹,
- But only 20% of symptomatic adolescents diagnosed with asthma².
- Even of those with a diagnosis, the majority does not use regular asthma medication².
- Focus groups revealed misconceptions and stigma about asthma in adolescents, parents, and teachers, across six sub-Saharan African countries^{3,4}.



References:

¹Adeloye, D., Yee, K., Chan, I., Rudan, H. and Campbell, H. (2013). "An estimate of asthma prevalence in Africa: a systematic analysis." *Croat Med J.* **54**: 519-531

²Oyenuga, V. O., Mosler, G., Addo-Yobo, E., Adeyeye, O. O., Arhin, B., Fortune, F., et al. (2024). "Asthma symptoms, severity, and control with and without a clinical diagnosis of asthma in early adolescence in sub-Saharan Africa: a multi-country, school-based, cross-sectional study." *Lancet Child Adolesc Health* 8(12):859-871.

³Naidoo, K. L., Dladla, S., Mphahlele, R. E., Mosler, G., Muyemayema, S., Ssemata, et al. (2023a). "A cross-country qualitative analysis of teachers' perceptions of asthma care in sub-Saharan Africa." *NPJ Prim Care Respir Med* 33(1): 31.

⁴Naidoo, K. L., Dladla, S., Mphahlele, R. E., Mosler, G., Muyemayema, S., Ssemata, et al. (2023b). "Barriers to childhood asthma care in sub-Saharan Africa: a multicountry qualitative study with children and their caregivers." *BMJ Open* 13(9): e070784.

Background/ Rationale

Why did we use educational theatre:

- Theatre has been successfully used in Africa to communicate about health issues such as HIV/AIDS and malaria^{5,6}.
- It combines storytelling, emotion, and community participation to make health messages memorable^{7,8}.
- Our study tested whether theatre could similarly improve knowledge about asthma, awareness, and attitudes.



References

- ⁵ Faust, L. and Yaya, S. (2018). "The effect of HIV educational interventions on HIV-related knowledge, condom use, and HIV incidence in sub-Saharan Africa: a systematic review and meta-analysis." *BMC Public Health* 18(1): 1254.
- ⁶ Owusu-Addo, E. and Owusu-Addo, S. B. (2014). "Effectiveness of Health Education in Community-based Malaria Prevention and Control Interventions in sub-Saharan Africa: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Biology, Agriculture and Healthcare* 4(3).
- ⁷ Mbizvo, E. (2006). "Essay: Theatre—a force for health promotion." *The Lancet* 368: S30-S31
- ⁸ WHO Regional Office for Europe (2019). What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review. *Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report*. **67**: 146.

CEI pathway, activities, and groups involved

Participants: 3,534 adolescents, aged 11–17

African cities: Kumasi - Ghana; Blantyre - Malawi; Lagos - Nigeria; Durban - South Africa; Kampala - Uganda; and Harare - Zimbabwe

Setting: Local schools and school community performances

Evaluation: Pre-post theatre questionnaires

Educational Theatre

Theme:

- A school girl, Jai, with a passion for football who has asthma
- She is trying to navigate her life between school, parents, doctors, and training

- ***Short clip from a performance in South Africa (Assitej theatre group)***

Further videos: www.acacia-asthma.org/resources



Video clip from South African theatre

Educational Theatre

Further videos: www.acacia-asthma.org/resources

Educational themes of the play include:

- What asthma is and how it can be managed
- Dispelling Myths (e.g., “asthma is contagious”)
- Encouraging empathy and support for those with asthma

Post-theatre workshop

The main actress stays in role during a guided discussion with the audience

- The audience discusses Jai’s situation from the view points of different actors, and
- is asked to consider different solution for Jai
- An approach that comes from the ‘theatre of the oppressed’ concept⁹



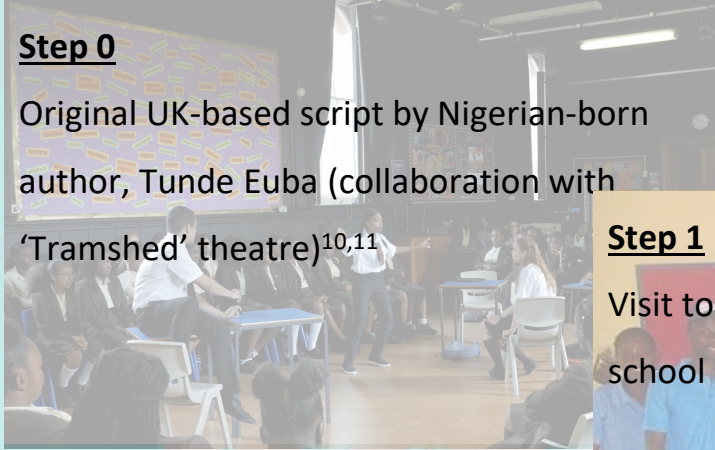
References:

⁹ Bhaskar, E., Rajkumar, M., Vasanthan, K. and Kumar, N. S. (2012). "Exploring medical humanities through theatre of the oppressed." Indian J Psychiatry 54(3): 295-296.

Pathway to cultural relevance

Step 0

Original UK-based script by Nigerian-born author, Tunde Euba (collaboration with 'Tramshed' theatre)^{10,11}



Step 1

Visit to Nigeria and Malawi, talking to groups of school children with the local theatre



Step 2

Initial adaptation to Nigerian context



¹⁰ Mosler, G. and Euba, T. (2018). "Taking control through drama." *The Lancet* 391(10118): 303-304.

¹¹ Harris, K., Newby, C., Mosler, G., Steed, L., Griffiths, C. and Grigg, J. (2022). "School-based self-management intervention using theatre to improve asthma control in adolescents: a pilot cluster-randomised controlled trial." *Pilot Feasibility Stud* 8(1): 67.

Pathway to cultural relevance

Step 3: Adaptations to local cultural context led by local theatre groups in collaboration with researchers

- theatre professionals in those countries adapted the language, e.g. using local idioms, place names, celebrity references, nicknames, and the tone;
- research teams were actively involved throughout the process to ensure that the text remained true to the objectives and educational values
- research teams in Malawi, Uganda, and South Africa furthermore translated the script into local languages (Chichewa, Luganda, and IsiZulu respectively)



Key findings

Statement	Answers summarised	% Before (n/total)	% After (n/total)
"I feel I understand asthma"	agree/strongly agree	49% (1730/3513)	85% (2878/3402)
"You can catch asthma from someone"(not true)	Correct answers	60% (2099/3516)	78% (2668/3406)
"Once you have asthma you have it for life" (true)	Correct answers	45% (1564/3511)	61% (2072/3399)
"People with asthma can play sports" (true)	Correct answers	44% (1538/3508)	91% (3042/3341)
"Having asthma affects people emotionally"	agree/strongly agree	54% (1884/3491)	82% (2795/3404)

All pre- post- changes were statistically significant at 0.01 level using Wilcoxon's signed rank test

Key findings

Enjoyment and engagement:

- 91% found the performance fun
- 98% found that they learned about asthma from the performance
- 84% agreed that watching the theatre changed how they think or feel about asthma

A quarter of participants said the performance made them want to better look after their own health, and almost half said that people should talk about health issues more.

Voices from our participants

School audience in Ghana

- "I am ready to support my friend with asthma in my class."
- "Asthma is a disease of breathing. If I see a child struggling to breathe, I will call my teacher immediately."

Clinicians watching the play in Nigeria:

- "Watching the theatre, I could sense people truly understanding what it means to live with asthma every day."
- "I will never forget seeing parents nod along during the performance. It felt like their children's struggles were being reflected on stage."
- "For me, the theatre was eye-opening. It showed that you don't always need a medical lecture to make an impact, sometimes one honest story can touch hearts and change minds."

Conclusions

- Theatre is a powerful and culturally resonant method for asthma education in the African contexts.
- It can transform understanding, reduce stigma, and support wider public health goals.
- Future work: Long-term impact assessment, teacher and parent engagement, and adaptation for other NCDs.

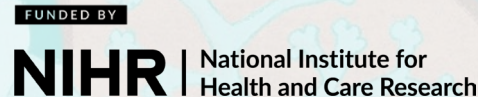


South
Africa

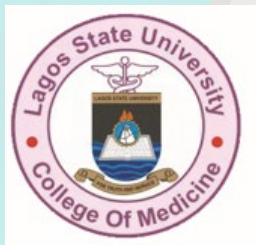
Implications for Practice

- Community-led theatre can be a powerful tool for effective health education.
- Collaborating with local groups ensures cultural fit.
- Schools, NGOs, and health ministries should consider using theatre for health education about non-communicable diseases as part of health promotion programmes.





Collaborators



KWAME NKRUMAH UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY



Acknowledgements

A special thanks goes to all the theatre companies and drama schools who were involved:

- Dr Ekua Ekumah at the **School of Performing Arts** at University of Ghana;
- Paul Sezzie at the **Society for Education Initiative** in Malawi;
- Prof Sola Fosudo and his team at the **Department of Theatre Art and Music** at Lagos State University, Ojo, Nigeria;
- Mthokozisi Zulu, Yvette Hardie, and Pauline Dalais at **ASSITEJ** in South Africa;
- the team of **Dynamo Creative Arts Ltd** in Kampala, Uganda;
- Prof Chivandika at the **University of Zimbabwe Faculty of Arts** in Zimbabwe.

We also acknowledge the participating adolescents, schools, and communities whose enthusiasm and openness made this project possible!

Thank you very much!

