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“POOL: A Social History of Segregation Exhibition” Exploring Social Justice Through the Lens of Water Safety Awareness and Art-based Education

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Abstract

Art exhibitions, with a focus on water safety and drowning prevention, are rarely seen as a medium to address social justice and public health, or water safety awareness and drowning prevention efforts in communities. Globally, data have shown drowning is considered a “neglected public health threat” (World Health Organization, 2021, CDC, 2023). Additionally, reports have shown that across the globe there are demographic groups of people impacted by drowning, historical traumas, and social determinants, also impacting some communities that are at greater risk (WHO 2021, CDC, 2023). Although there are national and international efforts to address the importance of water safety, drowning prevention, and its disproportionate impact on historically marginalized, Black, Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC), and culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) groups, alternative mediums, such as exhibitions of art, which can portray narratives of groups of people and their relationships with water, should be explored to counter stigma, and correct the narratives of BIPOC’s communal relationships to water, in an effort combat drowning disparities. As readers, you are encouraged to participate in this ongoing research and enter the “POOL” <http://poolphl.com/>, and explore “A Social History of Segregation” and Learn <http://poolphl.com/learn.html> (POOL-ongoing, 2021).

Key Words: swimming pools, equity, social justice, art and water safety education, art and drowning prevention, social justice and art, art-based education

Introduction

Globally, drowning is considered a “neglected public health threat” (WHO, 2014). Reports have shown that there are groups of people in certain communities who are at greater risk. African Americans, as a group, have a drowning death rate 9% higher than that of the overall population, with the greatest disparity being among African American youth (Denny et al., 2019; Clemens et al., 2021; Moreland, et. al. 2022). While many national programs and organizations present water safety awareness and drowning prevention efforts within communities, very few offer multi-sectoral collaborative efforts (WHO, 2017) among culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) or Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) aquatic stakeholders designed to empower, promote, and support water safety awareness in communities (Beale-Tawfeeq et al., 2018; Beale-Tawfeeq et al., 2020).

The POOL: A Social History of Segregation, was “created to illuminate a little-known history of segregated swimming in America and its connection to present-day drowning issues affecting Black communities. Weaving together history, art, storytelling, scholarship, and place-based learning, this multi-disciplinary work explores the role of public pools in communities with the goal

of deepening understanding of the connection between water, social justice, and public health” (POOL, 2021-ongoing). Although, in the U.S. public water and clean water access are lauded as one of public health’s “greatest accomplishments” to date access to pools, for the communities of BIPOC is neither equitable nor accessible for all (Waller & BeMiller, 2018). Drowning is preventable. Clemens et al. (2021) noted that the drowning disparities for Black People in the United States are 1.5 higher than for White People and are more prevalent in swimming pool deaths. The importance of acknowledging and illuminating the impact of how systemic racism has shaped past and present-day inequitable conditions of public access to “water” (i.e. public pools, clean drinking water, environmental justice/Clean Water Act), and its connection to present-day health and drowning disparities in African American and historically marginalized communities is a must (American Public Health Association APHA, 2020; O’Reily, 2020; Paine et al., 2021).

Purpose

Swimming pools have long been a source of inequity when it comes to the distribution of resources, and access to recreational services and resources in the United States (Waller & BeMiller, 2018), with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating inequities in healthcare and resources, especially among BIPOC (Paremoer et al., 2021), bringing attention to the ways that socioeconomic status, racism, and access to educational opportunities impact health and wellbeing (Emeny et al, 2021). This wonderful exhibition provides causes a visitor, to want to harness the energy and power, to become an advocate, engaged in community planning and policymaking that protect the recreation infrastructure in communities, and move the needle of social justice toward equity. Equitable provision and distribution of aquatics programming and facilities to “empower, promote, and support” an understanding of how structural racism, segregation, and water safety awareness in historically underrepresented communities to save lives, is essential. POOL: A Social History of Segregation exhibition, is a one in a kind art exhibition, attempting to challenge visitors, through a one-of-a-kind artistic experience to become global culturally aware citizens, through a culturally competent artistic educational experience.

Historically, water safety education and drowning prevention efforts have focused on the importance of water competency skill development to save lives (Stallman et al., 2017), with scholars recently extending the definition of water competency to include the importance of social and cultural diversity, when engaging global efforts toward drowning prevention, to assist the most vulnerable communities (Pinto et al., 2023; Dawson, 2018; Waller et al., 2018; Denny et al., 2021; Sakamoto et al., 2020). Although drowning has been identified as a “neglected public health epidemic”, traditionally in the United States, water safety

education and drowning prevention efforts, have not included values, such as social justice, structural racism, nor the social determinants of health (SDOH) (i.e. living conditions, socioeconomic status, employment, living conditions, race/ethnicity, food security, and exposure to environmental pollutants) which disproportionately impact the historically marginalized communities (Beale et al., 2020). It is via this lens that POOL: A Social History of Segregation (POOL) was created, to call for all visitors to reconsider the history, that we have learned, or been taught to forget when attempting to address communal relationships with water, pools, and disparities in drowning. POOL displays a timeline of the role of public pools in communities, segregated swimming in America, and its impact on present-day drowning issues affecting the African American community, with the goal of deepening understanding of the connection between water, social justice, and public health. Therefore the purpose of this study is to explore the impact of the “POOL” Exhibition, as an Art-based Education tool, used to raise water safety awareness and drowning prevention in communities, with a focus on the drowning disparities in communities of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), via the attitudes and perceptions of visitors, who virtually (i.e. virtual <http://poolphl.com/>, <http://poolphl.com/learn.html>); or physically attend the POOL: A Social History of Segregation exhibition, at the Fairmount Water Works (i.e. on-site <https://fairmountwaterworks.org/pool/>) (Prizzia, POOL-ongoing, 2021).

Stepping Mindfully into “POOL”

"A generation which ignores history has no past and no future." (Heinlein, 1973; Krawec, 2022).

Pool: A Social History of Segregation (POOL) is a 4,700 square-foot, multi-disciplinary museum exhibition which presently is set, on-site, in the Kelly Pool of the National Historic Landmark Fairmount Water Works, located on historic Boathouse Row in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania <https://fairmountwaterworks.org/> (Fairmount Water Works, 2023). Fairmount Water Works operated as the sole pumping station for the city of Philadelphia from 1815 to 1909 before being deactivated. From 1911 to 1962, Fairmount Water Works (FWW) served as the Philadelphia Aquarium, and then for the next ten years until 1972 was repurposed as the John B. Kelly Pool in honor of the native Philadelphian, John B. Kelly, who was an accomplished oarsman and three-time Olympic champion in Men’s Rowing from 1920 to 1924. And today the John B. Kelly Pool serves as the Philadelphia Water Department’s (PWD) public education and environmental center, serving as a leading repository for urban watershed research and data associated with PWD’s innovative green management solutions to treat stormwater as a precious resource and to restore our rivers and streams to clean safe, fishable, swimmable, and beautiful amenities” as well as the onsite home of the POOL exhibition (Fairmount, 2023).

The exhibit is not confined to FWW itself; it transcends the “walls” of its physical existence, bridging a “Community of Practice”, unearthing the history of the importance of water, maritime life, and swimming in the African Diaspora, and the impact of segregation on swimming and access to aquatic spaces in America. The design of the exhibit is also miraculous and first-rate. The intentional use of the National Historic Landmark, Kelly Pool, Fairmount Water Works (FWW), in Philadelphia, PA, opens a treasure chest that reveals a little-known the history of swimming in African American community in the city. This 4,700 square-foot, multi-disciplinary museum exhibition is filled with exhibits that contain archival research, multi-media displays, and narratives shared by BIPOC scholars, Olympians, Aquatic Professionals coaches, and global, national, regional, and local community members of all ages. Additionally, the “thoughtful, and mindful” efforts taken by Victoria Prizzia, POOL’s exhibition designer and curator, with regard to how the exhibits are installed, materials used, and room design/interior architecture were positioned, also allowed POOL, to exhibit the importance of “water competency” when it literally and figuratively, unexpectedly entered a body of water, returned to the service, had to tread, float, have breath control, look for the nearest exit, swim to the nearest exit, and get out of the water, to survive, when Hurricane Ida, hit the city of Philadelphia in September of 2021, adding a crucial dimension to the value of the exhibition, as a well-executed model of art-based educational exhibition placed in the context of an already robust historic site.

Method

This qualitative-based mixed methods study will utilize a descriptive cross-sectional design and narrative inquiry. Qualitative research methods allow for “controlled data collection methods to generate numerical data” which will let the researchers “assess the scope of an issue overall and within subgroups.” Cross-sectional designs provide a portrait of a group during one point in time and are used frequently with standard survey-based instruments (i.e., self-administered surveys) (Fink, 2003). Additionally, cross-sectional designs usually take less time to carry out. The present study has been approved by the Rowan University IORG/IRB: Glassboro/CMSRU Institutional Review Board.

Data collection methods will:

1. Investigate the perceptions and attitudes of visitors, who virtually or physically attend the POOL: A Social History of Segregation exhibition, at the Fairmount Water Works, by implementing a volunteer opt-in online survey including demographic information.
2. Collect data through volunteer opt-in response cards and self-administered online survey after their visit to the virtual or physical POOL: A Social History

- of Segregation Exhibition, in an effort to gather descriptive information, and unsolicited qualitative comments regarding their attitudes.
3. Study will use a posttest-only method for collecting data on the impact of the exhibition on the attitudes of visitors who will be encouraged to complete a response card and or online survey after their virtual or onsite visit to the POOL: A Social History of Segregation exhibition.
 4. The response cards and QR code to the online survey will be placed on an information desk, accompanied by signage throughout the exhibition, that will encourage visitors to complete them. Additionally, to maximize response rates the QR code to the online survey will also be linked to the online access to the exhibit. The response cards will be attractively designed, easily accessible, and can be completed in less than a minute.
 5. The survey protocols, embedded or hard copy consent form, postcard campaign/response cards, and the online survey will be open throughout the duration of the exhibition from May 1, 2022, through September 2023, with the possibility of an extended exhibition.
 6. Following the completion of data collection, researchers will analyze data, and provide presentations and national and international levels.
 7. Data were collected through the postcard campaign through which hundreds of patrons left thoughtful responses that populate a floor-to-ceiling cabana wall of the exhibit, allowing for the voices of visitors to become a part of the experience.

The Pool: A Social History of Segregation Exhibition includes the reflections and experiences of patrons in the heart of the exhibition through its wonderful postcard campaign where hundreds of patrons have left thoughtful responses that populate a floor-to-ceiling cabana wall of the exhibit, allowing for the voices of visitors to become a part of the experience. This feedback loop is one part of a holistic evaluation strategy that included front-end questionnaires that reached 3,100 people as well as ongoing summative research in collaboration with esteemed research scholars in association with the national grassroots network and force for change, Diversity in Aquatics. As of April 14, 2022, (and with limited operating hours to three weekdays and Saturdays) 800 people have visited POOL and 100 guests have responded to our postcard/response card campaign leaving thoughtful responses to be shared on the cabana wall which displays the prompt “What does it feel like to swim?”

Conclusion

POOL: A Social History of Segregation, as an Art-based water safety education and drowning prevention medium strives to capture and explore the multidimensional intersectionality of society, culture, human actions, and life, through the lens of history and participants’ life experiences. It is the goal of the

research to provide access. The POOL exhibition does not merely display and interpret the presence of African Americans, disproportionately impacted by drowning, in aquatic spaces, and it truly adds to the emergent body of literature, with the goal of deepening understanding of the connection between public health and historically marginalized communities disproportionately impacted by drowning. Water as a healing power is a foundational principle of the exhibition, enveloping each exhibit with a belief that human engagement with water can have a positive impact on our emotions in relation to water (Nichols, 2014). It is the hope of aquatic stakeholders (i.e. community members, CBOs, NGOs, K-16 school districts and educational entities, aquatic enthusiasts, researchers, athletes, professionals, parents/caregivers) that the POOL: A Social History of Segregation exhibition, will be re-envisioned, repurposed, into a traveling exhibition to be used, and seen as an exemplar of practice, to increase water safety awareness in communities and let all communities know that drowning is preventable.

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