Historical Research: A Thematic Analysis of Convention and Conference Themes for Selected Professional Health Education Associations from 1975 to 2009

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Abstract

Many professional organizations and associations hold conventions and conferences on an annual basis. Health Education professional associations take part in this process. Using a historical research perspective, this article delineates conference themes for four prominent professional Health Education associations: the American Association for Health Education (AAHE), the American Public Health Association (APHA), the American School Health Association (ASHA), and the Society for Public Health Education (SOPHE). Data were collected, examined, analyzed by thematic content analysis, and then organized by association, year and location. Development of an appropriate methodology for thematic data collection and analysis are described.

Key Words*: Theme, Professional Association, Historical Research, Thematic Content Analysis, Textual Analysis, Qualitative Method*

Introduction

Interest in the history of health education and the role and development of professional associations is an important but often overlooked topic in the literature. As a profession, we are often limited by what materials exist, whether or not the data have been collected, organized and presented, the perspective and interpretation of the author of those materials, and by our ability to actually access or obtain copies of these materials.

Purpose of Study

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide a listing of the data collected and an historical review of annual meeting themes for four of the more prominent health education professional associations; the American Association for Health Education (AAHE), the American Public Health Association (APHA), the American School Health Association (ASHA), and the Society for Public Health Education (SOPHE). This review includes a thematic content analysis of all health education conference themes between the years 1975 and 2009.

Background

Qualitative research offers an opportunity for in-depth examination of information. Polkinghorne[1] argued that conducting qualitative research primarily focuses on data generation and much less on the procedures for analyzing the data. Researchers often search for systematic procedures for data collection and data analysis, including guidance for interpretation of the data.[2] There are several reasons for these perceived difficulties in qualitative methodologies, such as the intuitive process used by researchers working with their data and because methods developed for one area of work may not be easily translated or applied to another. Hence, a research method may not have precedence in the literature (as in the case for this study), because it may require some combination of research steps to achieve the desired results.

Historical research gives perspective. Best and Kahn[3] defined history as a meaningful record of human achievement, not merely a chronological record of events but a truthful account of the relationships among persons, events, times, and places. A historical research method applies to all fields of study because it encompasses their origins, growth, theories, personalities, and crises.

Wiersma[4] defined historical research as the process of critical inquiry into past events to produce an accurate description and interpretation of those events. Historical research uses no single method because of its complexity and all-encompassing nature.[5] Barzun and Graff [6] added that history is not a subject unto itself but rather a mode of thinking that incorporates reflection upon the past.

Methods

Research Design

Busha & Harter[7(p.91)] described the basic steps of historical research as a rigorous collection and organization of the information, data, or evidence; verification of the authenticity and veracity of information and its sources; critical analysis of the data; selection, organization, and analysis of the most pertinent collected evidence (data synthesis); and development and recording of conclusions in a meaningful manner. We endeavored to follow these steps in the current study.

Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered through a review of the health education literature, [8-10] a review of professional association web sites, interviews and communication with professional association staff members, interviews with current or past historians, and archivists for the different professional associations. Specific data sought included conference and convention themes between the years 1975 and 2009, including the city and state where the event took place. Data were organized and presented in Table 1.

Data Analysis

Textual analysis (a qualitative, non-traditional component of content analysis) examines the words and phrases that are used in a message. The focus of this analysis was on looking at the occurrence of selected terms within the themes, which included both implicit and explicit interpretations. While explicit terms obviously are easy to identify, coding for implicit terms was based on a somewhat

subjective system. The words and phrases selected should represent some patterned meaning or grouping within the data set. An important question to address in terms of coding is: what constitutes a group or category? Were the words and phrases conceptual, literal, practical, or topical? How many times must a word, phrase or concept occur to be considered a group or category? As this is a qualitative analysis, there is no specific rule to follow.

To clarify our methodology, we chose the label *textual* or *thematic content analysis* as a basis for data analysis. Linking *content* with *thematic* also served to distinguish this method from other types of content analysis that typically focus on counting the frequencies of words.[11-13] Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. At a basic level, it allows for organization and description of data. Thematic analysis is widely used but there is limited agreement about the steps and procedures researchers should follow.[14]

In preparation for the analysis, data were organized by association, year, conference theme, and location. (See Table 1) Themes were carefully studied and placed into groupings then, categories. This involved a process of organizing the data according to category, thus creating groups of data and corresponding notes. We acknowledge that the categories developed did not derive only from the data but were influenced by the literature and background reading including the researchers' professional experience and values.[15, 16] While these factors contributed to the conceptualization process, care was taken to ensure that the categories reflected the data and were not manipulated to force the data to fit within the categories. The data derived from this literal textual analysis is located in Table 2. A more subjective analysis of the themes can be found in Table 3.

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis was conducted based on a six step method described by Braun and Clarke.[14] Step one involves becoming familiar with the data. For this review, both authors contributed to the data collection and organization of data in Table 1. Step two is the generation of initial codes. Data were reviewed and initially coded by each author individually. Codes (themes) were compared and discussed. Step three transformed the codes into grouped data. Grouped data were then organized into categories. Step four is a review of themes that emerged from the previous steps to determine if the

grouped data and the categories identified are clearly representative of the initial data. For example, once the data were grouped could relationships between groups be determined? Were there other categories that emerged? Step five is the definition or labeling of categories. And Step 6 consists of linking the themes to the existing literature.[14]

Results

Preservation of data and information related to the professional health education associations are needed to build a lasting foundation for the future. Because the four professional associations selected for inclusion in this study are member driven, mechanisms for data preservation may be overlooked, considered to be extraneous, or deemed not as important as more current pressing concerns. Continuous collection and organization of historical data should be maintained. A collection of historical documents, articles, and books about health education professional associations has been published elsewhere.[16]

Table 1 shows a collection of data from 1975 to 2009 organized by professional association, year, conference or convention theme, and location (city and state) where the event took place. As such, initial categories for coding the data included organization, date, theme, and location of meeting. Multiple sources of information were used to create as complete a data set as was possible to obtain. Some variation and differing reports on conference themes were reported for AAHPERD/AAHE between 1970 and 1985. The two primary resources were the AAHE archives and an article written by Richard K. Means and Ann Nolte[17] that was published in 1987 and provided a historical review of events and activities for AAHPERD/AAHE covering the previous 50 years.

A literal analysis of keywords and concepts was conducted to assess the textual or thematic content of each conference theme. Table 2 organizes the data by key words and concepts, e.g., prevention, change, collaboration, unity across associations.

A more subjective review of the conference themes revealed a number of groupings or categories across all four professional associations. Conceptual themes included legacy of the profession, professionalism, partnership and collaboration, cultural diversity, international or global health, human rights, and social justice. More practical themes emerged as well, e.g., personal responsibility for health;

marketing and advocacy; health education professionals as community or public health workers, to name a few.

A few insights emerged when reviewing data in the context of each professional association. For example, a significant proportion (75%) of ASHA conference themes focused on family, children, and youth. This emphasis is in line with the organization's mission "to protect and promote the health of children and youth by supporting coordinated school health programs as a foundation for school success."[18] ASHA identifies five specific goals to achieve this mission, one of which clearly promotes "interdisciplinary collaboration among all who work to protect and improve the health, safety and well-being of children, youth, families and communities."[18] Population-specific themes have not been a particular focus for conference themes identified by the other three associations.

AAHE, one of the five professional associations within AAHPERD, does not have the opportunity to develop its own theme for the annual meeting and is thus limited in the potential benefits derived from a convention theme. As one might expect, these themes are not particularly reflective of the vision or mission of AAHE.[19] AAHPERD has promoted many sport-oriented themes, e.g., team, movement, spirit, baton, distance. To date, there have not been any themes specifically identified as health or health-related. What is somewhat surprising is that the sport-oriented themes also are not reflective of the AAHPERD vision or mission statement.[20] This may partially be attributed to the method of selection of the conference or convention theme. The AAPHERD president selects the theme for the annual meeting, so themes may be more reflective of a personal choice or platform issue rather than a link to the Alliance or the stated vision or mission. For example, AAHPERD's President in 2007 chose the theme "Valuable, Viable, Visible," which seemed to be linked to the proposed name change for the Alliance and the suggested benefits that were associated with the proposed name change. SOPHE and APHA were more likely to select a theme that focused on a health-related or healthcare oriented theme. Themes around politics or policy development also were noted. These themes are aligned with the vision and mission statements of their respective associations.[21, 22]

Table 3 shows themes reflective of the city or location for the conference or some special or unique feature for that location. In addition, themes reflective of popular culture or a current movie were noted. Popular cultural references like the stereotypical mid-life crisis, Disney theme parks, or iconic phrases like "Liberty, Justice and Health for All" were identified. Some movie titles were "Back to the Future" (ASHA 2001), "Supersize Me" (ASHA 2005) and "2001 A Space Odyssey" (SOPHE 2001).

Discussion

Historical research provides an analytical framework or approach that ought to be present in any analysis of popular culture. Gathering data, collecting information, observing and analyzing historical change over time can provide a foundation for understanding the history of the health education profession in the United States. Clinton Strong [23(p.34)] said "the depth of a field, its traditions, and even its present comes from its history." A concerted effort should be made to develop and maintain an empirical database[16] to document important events, developments, and experiences that occur as the health education profession continues to develop. This material can help provide future generations with an opportunity to develop a working knowledge of the past, present, and even the future of health education.

In the current study, data were collected from a wide range of sources in order to develop as complete a data set as possible. Data were organized into table format including the organization, year, theme, and location of the annual meeting. Textual or thematic content analysis focused on identifiable themes and patterns. Themes that emerged from the data were organized to form a comprehensive collection. As noted by Leininger, [24(p. 60)] the "coherence of ideas rests with the analyst who has rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way when linked together."

Our method of analysis demonstrated the following advantages over conventional content analysis: (1) it provided a convenient and reasonable means of finding meaningful themes in the text; (2) the themes emerged from the data rather than be imposed by the researchers; and (3) the techniques revealed the relative importance and interrelationships among the conference or convention themes.

While some of the professional associations included in this study utilized their selected conference themes more effectively than others, the findings in this study suggest that there are a number of potential benefits that have not been realized in the past.

Associations should look to the identification and selection of conference themes that have more of a connection to the mission and vision, more impact on the potential conference participants, set the desired tone for an event, or potentially help to sustain the organization. Each of the professional health education associations included in this study use a different process to identify and select their conference theme. It should be the goal of each organization to develop and create an exciting conference which stimulates discussion, fosters the exchange of ideas and knowledge, and generates more informed understanding of the relevant issues for the profession.

According to Margaret Mead, "the choice of a conference site is extremely important. The site should have distinction and style and should provide the kind of setting that can be used to shape as rapidly as possible the developing conference ethos." [25(p. 49)] To some extent, all four of the professional health education associations utilized location or some special or unique feature for the selected location as a focus of their conference theme, however, SOPHE seems to have utilized this approach more frequently. An effective theme also appears to be valuable as a marketing tool or to foster brand identification or loyalty. Potential benefits of a theme can include garnering attention for the association, conveyance of the association vision or mission, its' purpose or specific goals. Themes can aid marketing efforts, highlight location, situation, or events, emphasize social issues, focus on issues and concerns of the membership, or provide organizational structure for the conference

We offer a number of guiding questions for developing an effective conference theme. These include: Is the selected theme appropriate for the association, its membership, and potential conference participants? Is it clear and concise? Is it timely? Does it demonstrate creativity, cleverness, or uniqueness? Is it reflective of or compatible with the association's vision, mission, purpose or goals? Does it reference the host city or special features of the host location?

Conclusion

This project provided a listing and historical review of annual meeting themes for four of the major professional health education associations (AAHE, ASHA, APHA, & SOPHE). It utilized a qualitative, historical research approach that described a set of procedures for thematic content analysis. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first written compilation and analysis of professional conference themes across professional associations in health education. If a reader should find discrepancies in the data, please contact the lead author. Each of the professional health education associations included in this project maintain some form of historical archives. We hope that this article is viewed as a contribution to these data repositories and that at some point in the future, a collaborative health education archive can be developed that is comprehensive and inclusive of the entire profession.

While very little literature exists to provide guidance related to the conceptualization, development and selection of effective conference themes, it seems to be clear that conference themes have a place in the planning and development of an annual meeting or convention. However, the selection, identification, marketing, and utilization of themes appear to impact the image of the association and the perceptions of the association members and conference participants. Therefore, the leadership and members of these associations and others are encouraged to use this preliminary study to advance the health education profession.

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