

Bringing different generations together in music-making – An Intergenerational Music Project in East London

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Key words

Music, intergenerational activity, older learners, lifelong learning

Abstract

This article describes an intergenerational music project that took place as part of a bigger project, entitled the *Music for Life Project* that explored the social and emotional benefits of music participation for people over 50. The intergenerational project was led by two music leaders from the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. The participants involved were pupils from two primary schools in East London and seniors from two housing schemes, also in East London. The project culminated in a concert at the Pit Theatre, the Barbican Centre. Interviews and written responses from pupils and senior participants, as well as one music leader and teaching staff from the two schools highlighted many benefits of the initiative that brought different generations together through music such as opportunities to socialise and collaborate, enhanced wellbeing, enjoyment in being challenged and in developing (new) musical skills and appreciation of each other's role in the group.

Introduction

Research findings from the USA and the UK have indicated the positive influence of music on health with ageing (Cohen, 2009; Cohen *et al*, 2006; Taylor and Hallam, 2008). Cohen *et al* (2006) stressed that the beauty and productivity of art programmes can foster sustained involvement, as they keep participants engaged week after week, and can, therefore, contribute to positive outcomes for the participants. A later study using behavioural neuroscience supported the argument that every form of art provides optimal utilization of the benefits of synchronised hemisphere involvement, i.e. integration of left and right brain capacities. Cohen *et al* concluded that for the ageing brain, any form of art, for example, music or folk-art, is 'like chocolate to the brain' (p.77).

Research in music with older learners (Taylor and Hallam, 2008) has shown that making music after a lifetime of experiencing music as listeners offers the possibility of identity transformation in some older music learners and great satisfaction through the achievement of personal musical goals, enjoyment and the development of self-confidence. In addition, benefits such as participating in lifelong learning and social motivations, for instance, meeting new people and developing a sense of belonging have also been reported with older people's engagement in music (McQueen and Varvarigou, 2010).

With regard to intergenerational music activities, research from the USA (Cusicanqui and Salmon, 2005; Darrow *et al*, 2001) also reports benefits for both young and senior participants. Darrow *et al* (2001, pp. 43-44) explained that the primary purposes of intergenerational programmes are (i) to bridge the generation gap 'in mutually beneficial ways' and to support members of both age groups in battling 'isolation and disconnectedness' and (ii) to 'thwart negative age-related attitudes'. Participation in musical activities can support the 'creation of interpersonal attachments, the development of mutual concern and caring for one-another and the dissolution of stereotypes'. Darrow *et al*'s study described the attitudinal statements of audience members (high school students and older persons between 18 to 75 years old) towards teens and older persons after they observed an hour-long live performance of an established intergenerational choir. The purpose of the study was to collect, through pre- and post-observation questionnaires, the audience's perceptions toward teens' and older persons' performance in the choir. The results indicated that the attitudes of male and female teen subjects toward teens and seniors, both male and female, moved in a positive direction from pretest to posttest. Also, male and female seniors' attitudes toward teens and seniors of both genders made significantly greater gains in a positive direction from the pretest to the posttest. These findings indicate that a music context can provide a platform where the integration of generations can be observed and perhaps an environment where change in opinions about cross-age groups can occur.

A later study by Cusicanqui and Salmon (2005) explored the benefits of an intergenerational singing group that helped children adjust to the school environment and remain in school. It involved eight pupils (aged 10 and 11 years old) from an elementary school singing together with seniors living in a residence run by a settlement house in New York. The programme's main focus was twofold – to promote learning the basics of singing/ voice and to build up a sense of community for the participants. The two groups did not rehearse together regularly

but came together periodically (three sessions) to meet each other and sing together. The final session was an informal performance to the residents of the Senior Residence. On that day many children appeared confrontational and in conflict with each other, interpreted by the researcher as an expression of frustration that the programme was at an end. Also, half of the seniors did not turn up using ‘flight as a reaction’ (Cusicanqui and Salmon, 2005, p. 207) to dealing with the fact the singing project was finishing. Despite this, the concert was thoroughly enjoyed by all those who attended and participated in it. The authors concluded that through this intergenerational activity, the children ‘had developed more positive social skills and they appeared more confident, more enthusiastic, and appreciative of older people as well’. The seniors described it ‘as a renewing of life’ (p. 207).

The research reported here describes an intergenerational programme in music with seniors from two residential homes and children from two primary schools in East London. The aim of the project was to investigate the impact of the musical activity on the participants.

The research

The programme was of two months’ duration and culminated in a concert at the Barbican centre, London. The participants were children (35) from two primary schools with their class teachers (3), older music learners (11) from two housing schemes in East London and two creative music leaders. The population of the schools was mainly Bangladeshi children who, as their teachers explained, were quite used to having older relatives at home or staying in large families with grandparents as part of the household. This might explain the children’s familiarity and warmth in their interactions with the seniors.

The seniors started learning the songs during weekly sessions of one hour, beginning in January. They were joined by the children for the final weekly sessions in April. Two music leaders visited each school for an hour before the children joined the seniors in order to teach the children the songs, how to use small percussion instruments or how to use body percussion to accompany singing.

Following the final performance, data were collected through feedback forms, drawings and interviews with the children and through interviews with the seniors and one music leader. The feedback forms given to the children contained two questions: (i) ‘What was the best thing about singing and playing music with older people?’ and (ii) ‘What was the best thing

about participating in the concert at the Barbican Centre?’ Space was left on the page for the children to draw a picture of what it was like singing and playing music with older people. During the interview, the children were asked to talk about their experiences of making music with the seniors and of performing at the Barbican centre, London. When interviewed, the seniors talked about their experiences of collaborating with the children, their perception of the children before the project and their opinions about them after the project had finished. The seniors were also asked to make suggestions about how the project could be improved in order to be more enjoyable in the future. The teachers were asked about the impact of the project on the children and the school community as a whole, as well as their personal experiences from having the music leaders in their school before the joint sessions and during singing with seniors. Suggestions for improvement of the project were also offered by the teachers. Lastly, the music leader was asked about her own experiences of leading the project, the resources used and the activities that were planned, as well as suggestions for improvement in the future.

Data collection and analysis

Twenty-eight feedback forms and twenty-eight drawings were collected from the children. The drawings were subjected to content analysis. Codes were devised to group the drawings according to their content, their colour and the size of objects. The codes included information about who was in the drawing, other objects in the drawing, size of figures, facial expressions, action and whether the drawing was coloured or black and white (see also Creech and Hallam, 2006).

The data from the interviews and the feedback forms were analysed according to the seven-stage process developed by Cooper and McIntyre (1993). This interactive process of categorisation seeks to continually refine and test the description as it unfolds. The process involved:

1. Reading a random sample of scripts (9 interviews and 28 feedback forms)
2. Identifying points of similarity and difference amongst these transcripts in relation to the research questions
3. Generating theories, on the basis of two, describing emergent answers to the research questions
4. Testing theories against a new set of transcripts
5. Testing new theories against transcripts that have already been dealt with

6. Carrying all existing theories forward to new transcripts
7. Repeating the above process until all data have been examined and all theories tested against all data (Cooper and McIntyre, 1993).

NVivo 8 was used to support the process of analysis. Five main categories of codes emerged from the analysis. The codes dealt with comments on (i) affective responses, (ii) health and wellbeing, (iii) social relationships and interactions, (iv) teaching and learning and (v) performance.

Affective responses

The children and the seniors generated affective responses relating to emotions or feelings about their collaborative experience with each other. The children described this collaboration as 'fun' and added that they enjoyed making older people happy. The seniors said that they enjoyed the children's company (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 here

Health and wellbeing

For the seniors, having the children in their residential homes gave them energy, made them feel happy and gave them an opportunity to relate to the younger generation (Deci and Ryan, 2000). One senior participant mentioned how music made her feel younger. Another senior was very disappointed that money was invested in work that fewer residents enjoyed rather than musical activities that many more residents benefitted from (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 here

Social relationships and interactions

The intergenerational activity was an opportunity for different generations to socialize, show respect for each other and enjoy each other's company. The children, their teachers and the music leader all commented on the social relationships and interpersonal interactions that were fostered amongst the young and old. In particular, teachers observed the sense of enjoyment and respect among the children, while the children described the experience as exciting, interesting and fun (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 here

Figures 1 and 2 show drawings made by the children, which depict their experiences from this project and the final concert. Burkitt, Barrett and Davis (2003, p. 580) suggested that children increase the size of nice topics in order to achieve psychological affinity with such topics, whilst they decrease the size of unpleasant topics in order to achieve psychological distance from them. The analysis of the drawings showed that most drawing had big figures (21) either of the children or the seniors, most drawings were coloured (20) and they also had smiling faces (19) (see pictures 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5). No frowning children or seniors were found amongst the pictures. Some showed percussion instruments (13) (see Pictures 1, 3 and 5), twenty drawings depicted scenes from the concert (See Pictures 2 and 5) and nine from the music sessions at the housing scheme (see Pictures 1 and 3). With regard to the figures on the drawing, nine drawings had children only (see Picture 5), seven showed the children with the seniors (see Pictures 1 and 2), five showed the music leader, the children and the seniors, two showed seniors only (see Picture 4) and one showed one music leader and one senior (see Picture 3). Lastly, from the drawing that showed the concert six depicted the children being filmed (see Pictures 3 and 5) and five their impression of singing in front of an audience (see Picture 5).

Insert Figure 1 here

Teaching and learning

The music leader outlined what a great opportunity the project provided for her to develop skills in working with older people, learn more about what older learners enjoy in terms of repertoire and the activities and the methods she could use to help them learn the music through active participation. She reported that after she saw the enthusiasm with which the seniors copied the body movements the children used to accompany their singing she realised that incorporating dance aspects during the activity was enjoyable and valuable for the seniors. She also reported wanting more time and support from other music leaders to divide the bigger group into smaller groups. In that way, she felt that she could encourage more creative activities such as improvisation with small percussion instruments and the voice, better opportunities to teach both children and seniors how to play the djembe, the xylophone and the keyboard, the instruments used during the sessions. Also, in smaller groups she could spend more time with individuals who wanted to write lyrics and/or the melody for a new song. In addition, the music leader stressed the seniors' interest in developing musical skills

and knowledge, as well as their sense of progression, increased confidence and increased self-efficacy as the project developed (see Table 4).

Insert Table 4 here

Relating to their learning experiences the children reported how much they enjoyed playing percussion instruments and learning new songs. The teachers, who participated in the singing during the sessions, emphasised that through observations of the music sessions and the music leaders' visits in their school, they also developed ideas on how to combine different music activities with singing, which extended their musical expertise and confidence in teaching music (see Table 5).

Insert Table 5 here

Performance

The project culminated in a performance at the Pitt Theatre, the Barbican centre. Both the children and the seniors were excited by giving a performance in front of an audience and by being filmed and interviewed about their experiences by reporters from the Housing Scheme Association, who covered the event. They also felt a great sense of achievement (see Table 6). One teacher mentioned that the concert gave the children an opportunity to see that music can be pursued as a future professional career.

Insert Table 6 here

The following drawings (Figure 2) depict the seniors' happiness (smiling faces) from the children's visit to their housing scheme (Picture 4). Picture 4 is remarkably accurate in the depiction of the individual features of the senior participants (colour of clothes, hairstyle and facial features). Picture 5 captures the children's excitement in being filmed during the concert and in making the audience happy and proud of their achievement.

Insert Figure 2 here

Discussion and Conclusions

This intergenerational project offered learning opportunities for both the young and the old. An emotional need to connect with the children was expressed by all the seniors and for some of them their interaction with the children changed their own feelings toward children, in general, in a positive way. Negative stereotypes towards the elderly such as their isolation from community life, that they are lonely, ‘cranky people who dislike children’ (Cusicanqui and Salmon, 2005, p. 206), who fail in mental and physical health and who perceive children as having no respect and ‘being aggressive and dangerous’ (Darrow *et al*, 2001), were not evident among the members of this group through their successful music collaboration. The children found the seniors funny, kind and loving. The seniors found the children’s company and energy rejuvenating.

Peer learning through collaboration between juniors and seniors was also observed throughout the programme and the theme of progression was evident. The teachers’, the pupils’ and the seniors’ development and progression in musical skills and confidence indicate that intergenerational projects can have benefits other than the social and emotional.

Intergenerational programmes can be used as a way of sharing expertise, skills and ideas on repertoire and activities in music making with different age groups. In addition, children’s drawings revealed that for them the music leaders and some seniors were models of professional music practice that could be emulated (Taylor and Hallam, 2008), while the teachers indicated that the presence of other musicians during the concert made the children consider the potential of pursuing music as a future professional career.

Both groups experienced the joy of singing together and of learning new skills such as improvising on percussion instruments, using body percussion and using movements to accompany the songs (McQueen and Varvarigou, 2010). There was an increase in confidence and self-efficacy in singing and playing musical instruments, a finding which is also supported by other studies in music-making activities with older learners (Clift *et al*, 2008; Hays and Minichiello, 2005; Hillman, 2002). After the end of the programme the children expressed a desire to continue their relationships with the seniors, visit them in the future and make music with them again.

Although the journey towards the concert can be described in terms of the stimulation and enjoyment of the participants, future projects might consider the musical challenges for both

groups so that musical skills can be enhanced and higher level of attainment reached (McQueen and Varvarigou, 2010; Taylor and Hallam, 2008). More intergenerational group work could be promoted by local authorities, schools, universities and organisations that cater for activities for the elderly as bringing generations together in musical activities have considerable benefits for both the young and the old. Also, future research could compare different communities that might have different views on the older or younger generations.

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