



Play, Percussion & 'Post-Age' Pedagogy:

The Positive Effects of Intergenerational Music-Making

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The word 'intergenerational' literally means 'between...generations'¹ and can be defined as "groups of people from different generations interacting with each other"². The notion of intergenerational activity, learning and play has increasingly drawn attention over recent years, and a growing body of scholarly literature has begun to point more and more towards the premise that when senior citizens become involved in cross-generational learning activities with children and adolescents, huge benefits are accrued by both parties.²³⁴

Introduction: What is Intergenerational Play?

Terms such as 'inter/multi/cross generational' and 'post-age' have begun to arrive in fields ranging from experimental social theory⁵ through to local governmental policy⁶. The emergence of targeted intergenerational play programs is a relatively recent pedagogical and therapeutic turn - though one which has already quickly begun to pick up momentum.

At first glance, the premise is simple: intergenerational play refers to organized playful engagements enacted between members of two or more distinct generations, often employing one or more of the arts as an aid, including music. It has been used to improve the physical, cognitive and social wellbeing of senior citizens and those suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia⁷, to enhance the quality of life of disabled persons⁸, to refine the levels of literacy, behavior and communication in young children⁹, and to facilitate a sense of collective place-making within multigenerational communities¹⁰.

This white paper will begin to unpick and explore the notion of intergenerational play - specifically that which involves musical play and includes the implementation of musical instruments in its techniques - in order to systematically address some of the proposed benefits of the endeavor. First, we will examine the emergence of the movement, its potential areas of influence and overall supposed importance. Beyond this, sections will focus in on particular receptors of the supposed benefits of the movement.

We will engage with research which has suggested the benefits of intergenerational play for senior citizens in one section; in the following section, we will consider the advantageous cognitive and emotional impacts that intergenerational musical play has been proven to have on children and adolescents, before finally considering further positive influences that intergenerational play of this sort may exert on the wider community and sense of community place-making.

Intergenerational Play: Emergence & Importance

Initially, the movement developed - at least in part - out of an intention to bridge the generational gaps in contemporary family structures⁷: fragmentations in traditional familial life which have only recently emerged as a result of changes in modern family living arrangements. In our relatively recent history, it would have been customary for households to be multigenerational; it was

¹ 'inter-, prefix.' *OED Online*, Oxford University Press (2020)

² Carol Beynon & Chris Alfano, 'Intergenerational Music Learning in Community and Schools' (2013)

³ Chris Alfano, 'Intergenerational Learning in a High School Environment' (2008)

⁴ Dana L. Mitra, 'Strengthening Student Voice Initiatives in High Schools: An Examination of the Supports Needed for School-Based Youth-Adult Partnerships' (2009)

⁵ Joanna Haynes & Karin Murriss, 'Intra-generational Education: Imagining a Post-Age Pedagogy' (2017)

⁶ Norah Keating Deborah Kwan, Sarah Hillcoat-Nalletamby and Vanessa Burholt, 'Intergenerational Relationships: Experiences and Attitudes in the New Millennium' (2015)

⁷ Alice-Ann Darrow and Melita Belgrave, 'Students With Disabilities in Intergenerational Programs' (2013) 28

⁸ *Ibid.* 27

⁹ Michael R. Detmer et al., 'Intergenerational Music Therapy: Effects on Literacy, Physical Functioning, Self-Worth, and Interactions' (2019)

¹⁰ Koji Matsunobu, 'Music Making as Place Making: A Case Study of Community Music in Japan' (2018)

not uncommon for adult children to live with both their infirm or elderly parents and their own young children under the same roof, and highly likely for multiple generations to reside in close vicinity (i.e. in the same town, city etc.).

However, with the number of adult children moving away from family homes constantly increasing as communities become more digital and stratified, more and more senior citizens are moving into care homes, adult living communities, etc. Research has suggested that as a partial result of this dispersive trend, alterations in familial proximity have contributed towards the hostility, stereotyping and misconception which has arisen more recently between younger and older persons^{7,11}.

In an effort to address these social disjunctions, experiments in intergenerational play between the elderly and the young encourage “shared playful experiences across the generational divide” and therefore “offer...older people an investment in the future through engagement with the young”¹². Not only does this ability and opportunity to ‘invest’ give these senior citizens a renewed sense of purpose, it actually “encourages both children and adults to explore new challenges with mutual benefits for physical and cognitive health and a consequently enhanced quality of life”^{12,17}.

Fostering Intergenerational Connection: The Impact on Senior Citizens

These physical and cognitive health benefits - particularly for the elderly adults involved - have been observed in research to manifest in numerous different ways. Alongside the better publicized issues of inadequate physical activity and decreases in motor functioning that come with aging, a large proportion of senior citizens, especially those residing in long-term care homes or residential facilities, are more susceptible to developing an increase - perhaps mainly due to a potential sense of isolation from friends and family - in poor mental health. Depressive symptoms, loneliness and feelings of lowered self-esteem in these settings are often observed, in addition sometimes to a sense of decreased autonomy and a lack of control or purpose¹³.

The physical and psychological here, are perhaps unsurprisingly linked. The inevitable decrease in motor function and depletion in muscle content which come as a natural result of aging can elicit feelings of helplessness, isolation and despondency - which in turn can encourage a development in depressive symptoms and consequently lead to further isolation, lethargy and reluctance to engage or partake in everyday activities. Unfortunately, this can quickly become a vicious cycle for older adults. As physical capabilities deteriorate, so then do feelings of purpose and agency, which in turn discourage physical participation and activity, thus progressing into an acceleration in the aforementioned deterioration in physical capabilities^{14,15}.

Intergenerational musical play has been found, by multiple sources, to work as an effective partial remedy for such issues in elderly patients and residents. The combined effects of musical play and intergenerational social participation have proven to be incontrovertibly beneficial for the improvement and maintenance of the physical and mental health of senior citizens, according to various studies conducted globally. As a result of the various positive impacts that music can exert on people, as well as the nonexclusive accessibility and opportunity to participate, regardless of physical or psychological impairments, intergenerational musical play can serve as a fruitful, meaningful, and financially accessible activity for senior citizens⁹.

A 2019 study on intergenerational music therapy conducted in Louisville found that music, according to a systematic review of a total of 1,757 participants across 34 smaller studies, was proven to be powerful agent in reducing depressive and anxious symptoms in elderly and dementia patients, particularly those in residential facilities¹⁶.

Julia Whitaker and Alison Tonkin, in *Play and Playfulness for Public Health and Wellbeing*, a 2019 book-length study published by Routledge, have likewise observed that “intergenerational play offers older people an investment in the future through engagement with the young, and encourages both children and adults to explore new challenges with mutual benefits for physical and cognitive health and a consequently enhanced quality of life”¹². The combined effect of music and social participation, then, surely renders these therapeutic methods doubly beneficial⁹.

¹³ Lena Dahlberg & Kevin McKee, 'Correlates of Social and Emotional Loneliness in Older People: Evidence from an English Community Study' (2014)

¹⁴ Rodda, Joanne, Zuzana Walker and Janet Elizabeth Carter, 'Depression in Older Adults' (2011)

¹⁵ Holly Blake, Phoenix Kit Han Mo, Sumaira Malik and Shirley Thomas, 'How effective are physical activity interventions for alleviating depressive symptoms in older people? A systematic review' (2009)

¹⁶ Yingshi Zhang, Jiayi Cai, Li An, Fuhai Hui, 'Does Music Therapy Enhance Behavioral and Cognitive Function in Elderly Dementia Patients? A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis' (2017) 11.

An intergenerational musical play program conducted in Hamilton was demonstrative of this fact: the program was unusual in that it focused on “general music participation—as opposed to singing-only programming—for long term care (LTC) residents and elementary-school students”¹⁷. This “general music participation” to which the study refers makes it a particularly useful reference point for Percussion Play’s line of work, due to its exclusive emphasis being placed on the impact of non-vocal intergenerational music-making - primarily with a percussional focus in the workshops that collected data for the project.

The nature of this type of musical session is designed to facilitate an atmosphere which encourages “mutual teaching and learning”, in order to allow for the development of a kind of “reciprocity and...sense of purpose” in both child and adult, though perhaps most notably for the seniors involved. The study reported that not only did the workshops “facilitate...the formation of intergenerational relationships”, but they actually “improved [the] psychosocial status and enhanced [the] cognitive function” of the older adults who participated¹⁷.

Particularly, the study mentions a certain elderly participant who “presented as non-verbal at the beginning of the program” and yet was able to “fully converse with others by the end [of the program]”¹⁷. In a published randomized study of an intergenerational music therapy experiment, employing 3-4 year old children and older adults aged 72-98, similarly positive outcomes were observed. Results demonstrated a positive trend in each dependent variable and significant statistical data indicating the benefits of this kind of child-adult interaction.

Fostering Intergenerational Connection: The Impact on Children and Youth

According to a study conducted by Stanford in 2016, it is not solely the elderly who are positively impacted by these intergenerational connections and activities; research suggests that the benefits likewise extend to their younger counterparts. The study concludes that “older adults possess the key attributes that uniquely position them to benefit the young”¹⁸. The Legacy Project, a research, learning and social innovation group which works between and across generations, have identified the impact(s) that specifically intergenerational play has on children as being manifold.

Amongst the cited benefits, The Legacy Project note an acceleration in the development of social skills, emotional processing, communication and intelligence, an improvement in self-esteem and a breakdown of ageist stereotypes¹⁹. Where music is added into the equation, further acceleration in brain development, particularly in the parts of the brain responsible for the processing of sound, language development, speech perception and literacy and reading skills, can also be noted - according to the initial feedback from a five-year study conducted by USC neuroscientists²⁰.

Another intergenerational study based in Canada, The Hamilton Intergenerational Music Program (HIMP), specifically sought to observe the impact of intergenerational music-making sessions taking place between elementary school aged children and seniors in long-term residential care. Whilst this paper has already considered the physical and cognitive gain expressed by the more senior participants included in this experiment, it was not only these seniors for whom the program was incontrovertibly proven to be beneficial. In fact, the study reported numerous advantages and positive outcomes for the child participants as well.

The program aimed to facilitate the establishment of meaningful intergenerational relationships between participants, young and old, using music as the familiar common ground between the two age groups. Qualitative feedback suggested that children experienced heightened cognitive function and performance following the program; particularly, program leaders noted the reduced behavioral issues in one specific child with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). Similarly noted was a reduction in age-related stereotypes, enhanced psychosocial status (improved morale and mood) and a general enthusiasm expressed towards the program activities and the children’s new elderly friends¹⁷.

Intergenerational Musicality as a method of Collective Place-Making

¹⁷ Justin David, Michelle Yeung, John Vu, Tiffany Got & Chelsea Mackinnon, 'Connecting the Young and the Young at Heart: An Intergenerational Music Program' (2018)

¹⁸ Carol Larson, Laura Carstensen and Marc Freedman, 'Hidden in Plain Sight: How Intergenerational Relationships Can Transform our Future' (2016)

¹⁹ Susan V. Bosak, 'Benefits of Intergenerational Connections' (n/a)

²⁰ Emily Gersema, 'Children’s Brains Develop Faster with Music Training' (2016)

Clearly, the evidence supporting the role of music itself, musical therapies and intergenerational connection on accelerating the cognitive function and improving and maintaining the psychological welfare in children, as well as simultaneously providing these (and numerous other) physical, emotional and cerebral benefits for older adults, is highly convincing. Research has consistently observed significant and positive trends which closely relate the two. Yet, studies are also beginning to emerge which record the benefits of musical intergenerational connection outside of the residential care home or schoolyard.

Such studies have begun to measure the impact of this sort of intergenerational social participation on the making of a healthy community. As was noted towards the beginning of the paper, part of the initial reason for the emergence of intergenerational play as a concept was rooted in the issue of communities becoming increasingly stratified and fragmented, as a result of changes in traditional family structures in recent years. Community, at its most attractive, is set to denote a group of people joined by shared interests and values, characterized by “boundedness, intimacy, connection, intergenerational stability, and lack of internal division”²¹.

In 2018, one study conducted in Japan and reported by Koji Matsunobu set out to engage with three examples of multigenerational musical experiments in community place-making. Critical place-based pedagogical theory suggests that place has a definitive pedagogical role in the development of the child’s understanding of the world. Music educator Sandra L. Stauffer adopts such an understanding in her argument that the making of ‘place’ creates a conceptual framework for understanding how people experience music, and furthermore how meaning is constructed for them through musical participation²²;¹⁰. Conjectures such as these provide the theoretical foundation for studies of intergenerational musical community place-making such as those reported on by Matsunobu.

In one instance, in a mid-sized town between Osaka and Nagoya in Japan, a center was created with an intention to encourage young people to play music by providing them with a space, fitted with music equipment, allowing them to engage creatively with musical play²¹. Soon, the success of the project became apparent. Not only were young people able to utilize the space creatively, but ex-musicians who had moved away from the town actually returned in order to engage with the facilities, and older generations likewise became involved in both playing music and watching live music sessions. Ultimately, the center became an increasingly multigenerational hub - positioned at the core of the town community - and came to serve as a place for “social inclusion, mutual recognition, self-actualization and intergenerational support through music-making”²¹, and a site for the “intergenerational exchange of musical identities”²¹.

This case-study is situated amongst a growing body of emerging research which is starting to relate intergenerational music-making with place-making and specifically with the creation of authentic community and breaking down of age-related stereotypes, all whilst simultaneously working to improve the cognitive function, emotional capacity and physical wellbeing of participants.

The Power of Percussion Play

The outdoor musical instruments manufactured here at Percussion Play make the ideal addition to any schoolyard, residential care home, park or community center: any environment which hopes to foster the development of intergenerational musical play and thus improve the physical and psychological wellbeing of its community. Many of the instruments being pentatonically tuned, there is little to no reliance on musical skill - leaving children, adolescents, adults and senior citizens able to enter a non-hierarchical, nonexclusive creative environment that facilitates mutual learning and playing, regardless of age or ability. The proportion of our instruments which are wheelchair accessible further adds to this levelling out - allowing for people of all ages and physical abilities to engage on an even playing field with other members of their community. These outdoor musical instruments would function excellently within targeted intergenerational music therapy sessions or percussion workshop environments - such as those described in the studies cited, as well as serving an equally vital purpose by functioning as a center-point for more general intergenerational community building.

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²¹ Jan Nesper, 'Education and Place: A Review Essay' (2008)

²² Sandra L. Stauffer, 'Placing Curriculum in Music' (2009)

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