

Music for Life Project: The role of participation in community music activities in promoting social engagement and well-being in older people

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Key findings

- Measures of well being were consistently higher amongst the music participants (n=398) than amongst the comparison group (n=102);
- There was some positive change over time on quality of life measures, for those involved in musical activities;
- Participants reported social, cognitive, emotional and health benefits of participation in music;
- Some barriers to participation were identified, relating to access to information, structural, dispositional and social issues;
- Facilitators of musical activities with older people had specific training needs but few opportunities for CPD;
- Facilitators played a key role in fostering positive outcomes.

Background

Major demographic transitions are currently underway in the developed world with life expectancy set to continue rising and the expectation that by 2020 there will be a quarter more people over the age of 80, trebling to 9.5 million by 2071.

Research concerned with the role of music in older people's lives to date has been limited in scope although the work that has been undertaken has demonstrated a number of benefits and indicated the potential for enhancing health and wellbeing for older adults as they move from the Third (50–75) to the Fourth age (over 75). To date little of this research has been undertaken in the UK and few studies have focused on musical activities other than singing.

Participants

Three case study sites acted as partners in the research: The Sage, Gateshead; Westminster Adult Education Service; and the Connect programme at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama.

The musical activities engaged with included singing in small and large groups, rock groups, and classes for guitar, ukulele, steel pans, percussion, recorder, music appreciation and keyboard. A comparison group was made up of individuals attending language classes (4 groups); art/craft classes (5 groups); yoga; social support (2 groups); a book group; and a social club.

Aims

The aims of the Music for Life project were:

- to explore the way in which participating in creative music making activities can enhance the lives of older people;
- to consider the extent to which this may impact on social, emotional and cognitive well-being; and
- to consider the specific processes through which this occurs.

Findings

Measures of Quality of Life and Well-being

Quality of Life Measure: In comparison with those engaged in other group activities those actively engaged in making music scored higher on the sub-scales of the Quality of Life measures assessing control and pleasure. There were no statistically significant differences in relation to the sub-scales of autonomy and self-realisation or the overall score.

For those in the music groups, whether they were novices or more experienced in music, there was no change over the nine months of the programme on the Quality of Life measure, where a deterioration might have been expected.

Comparisons of scores on the Quality of Life scale between those in the Third and Fourth age in the music groups showed no significant difference on measures of autonomy or pleasure although there were statistically significant deteriorations in relation to control, self-realisation and the overall score. There was insufficient data from those in the Fourth age in the control group to make similar comparisons.

Basic psychological needs scale (Deci and Ryan, 2007):

Those participating in the musical activities scored higher on the relatedness subscale and overall score than those in the control group. There were no significant differences in relation to the sub-scales of autonomy or competence.

For those in the music groups, novices and more experienced participants, there was no change over the nine months of the programme on any of the sub-scales as might have been expected.

Comparison between the Third and Fourth age participants in the music groups showed no statistical differences in relation to autonomy, relatedness, or the whole scale. Those in the Fourth age did score significantly lower in relation to competence.

Combined scales: A factor analysis was undertaken using the items from the Quality of Life and the Basic Psychological Needs Scale. This produced three factors. The first related to having a positive outlook on life (purpose), the second to lack of autonomy and control (autonomy/control), and the third to positive social relationships, competence and a sense of recognised accomplishment (social affirmation). Comparisons of those engaged in music making with those participating in other activities revealed statistically significant differences on all three factors with the music groups having more positive responses.

Comparison of those in the music groups in the Third and Fourth ages in relation to the three factors revealed no statistically significant differences on factors two and three. Deterioration was in evidence only in relation to factor one, purpose.

The perceived benefits of group activities

Quantitative data: High ratings were given by those participating in music and non-music groups to a series of statements relating to the benefits of group participation, including:

- sustaining well-being, quality of life and reducing stress;
- acquiring new skills;
- providing opportunities for mental activity and intellectual stimulation;
- promoting social activity and involvement in the community;
- providing opportunities for demonstrating skills and helping others; and
- maintaining physical health.



There were no statistically significant differences in response to the elements outlined above between music and non-music groups, however, those participating in the music groups reported higher levels of enjoyment. A multiple regression analysis revealed that for those involved in musical activities (but not for those involved in other activities), the statement relating to community involvement was a statistically significant predictor of the third well-being factor – social affirmation. Strong agreement that participation in group activities provided opportunities to remain involved with the community was related to higher scores for social affirmation.

Qualitative data: Evidence from the individual and focus group interviews with participants and the interviews with facilitators revealed a range of perceived benefits of active musical engagement including those related to social activity, cognition, emotional and mental health and physical health.

The perceived social benefits included:

- giving structure to daily life;
- fun and enjoyment;
- generating a sense of belonging;
- providing opportunities to socialise with others including those from a different generation; and
- opportunities to give back to the community through performance.

The perceived cognitive benefits included:

- challenge and a sense of achievement;
- enhanced concentration and memory;
- keeping mentally active and having a sense of feeling young; and
- an increased appreciation of music.

The perceived emotional and mental health benefits included:

- protection against depression;
- protection against stress;
- the generation of positive emotions;
- support following bereavement;
- opportunities for creative expression;
- having a sense of purpose;
- confidence and empowerment; and
- feelings of rejuvenation.

The perceived physical health benefits included:

- alleviation of asthma and breathing difficulties;
- contribution to overall, general, physical health;
- the opportunity for a physical workout; and
- music as therapy.

Some participants reported rediscovering lost 'possible selves' as musicians, others developing new identities as musicians. Musical activity revived early memories, positive and negative, about engagement with music.

Opportunities for performance played a major role in the perceived benefits constituting a means of receiving position affirmation from others.

Intergenerational activities with primary school children were of benefit to children and older people. Both groups reported that it was fun and enjoyable, challenged stereotypes, and facilitated peer learning and the sharing of expertise.

The facilitators

Facilitators played a wide range of instruments (some more than one), worked in a range of different genres, and had a wide range of qualifications at different levels. Some had participated in community music training courses others had learnt on the job.

The facilitators saw benefits to themselves of working with older people. These included:

- opportunities for professional development;
- an opportunity to increase their knowledge of different genres and repertoire;
- personal satisfaction and fulfilment;
- warm and mutually respectful interactions;
- appreciation by others of their expertise; and
- a sense of belonging.

Teaching and learning

Facilitators reported that they aimed to foster enjoyment while offering challenge. Achieving the optimum balance between these was important and could be difficult.

Choice of repertoire was important. Participants preferred music that was relevant to their life histories. They rejected materials or practices that they felt were childish.

Facilitators stressed the need to adopt inclusive teaching practices, creating a welcoming atmosphere and having an open door policy.

Analysis of the recorded observations showed that, on average, 48% of the time was spent in active, practical music making. Participants spent 30% of their time listening passively, 10% in vocal or physical warm-ups, and the remainder on questioning, discussing, or offering opinions.

Facilitators spent about 15% of their time engaged in modelling, 48% of their time conducting, accompanying or playing and singing with participants, 10% on organisational activities, 6% diagnosing performance issues and explaining or answering questions, 5% asking questions, and 4% in directing activities. Feedback to participants was positive and expressed in general terms, e.g. good, well-done.

The facilitators adopted varying approaches to their groups, with some functioning informally as fellow musicians and others taking a more traditional leadership role. This depended on the nature of the activity, the size of the group and available space. Across all groups there was evidence of peer learning and mutual emotional support.

All of the groups worked towards a musical outcome. The facilitators recognised the importance of giving performances.

Facilitators reported that they had learned:

- the need for repetition and revisiting repertoire;
- to manage resistance to unfamiliar music, different genres and styles;

- the need to adapt activities for differing physical abilities;
- that games can work with older people;
- that older people are not necessarily better behaved than younger people and that difficult behaviour has to be managed;
- that sessions cannot be too long or participants tire;
- the need to adjust to individual and cultural expectations in terms of musical genres;
- not to use too many foreign language songs;
- the richness of the participants' social, professional and personal histories;
- the importance of making it fun, yet with purpose;
- increased patience;
- to adopt a slower pace, and speak slowly and clearly;
- to maintain a positive, uncritical atmosphere (to avoid encouraging criticism among participants);
- to keep the content relatively simple;
- the need to deal with poor punctuality; and
- to reflect on their usual teaching style (e.g. content driven) in relation to older learners.

Participants viewed good leaders as: knowledgeable; patient but in charge; positive, enthusiastic and enhancing motivation; having a sense of humour; responding to needs; and keeping a good pace and focus.

Supporting participation and overcoming barriers

Those attending the musical activities referred to very few barriers. Those mentioned included: location or access to it (e.g. stairs); time of day (evening was problematic); lack of transport or distance to the activity; ill health; cost; competing activities including caring for young or other relatives; the activity being perceived as having a religious connection or being elitist; social class or ethnic minority issues; and lack of confidence or motivation.

The social and pastoral support provided by the facilitators and other participants was important. Some groups set up buddying systems and absence was followed up. Very few people dropped out. The main cause of dropout was ill health.

There were some constraints in terms of resources including lack of or poor accommodation, lack of instruments and space to store them.

There was a need for better marketing and information about the activities on offer. The majority of participants found out through word of mouth.

Recruitment of staff was problematic owing to low pay, the part time nature of the work and perceived and actual challenges.



Methods

The research was undertaken using a variety of methods including:

- questionnaires for participants, music and non-music, at the beginning of the research including the Quality of Life measure and the Basic Psychological Needs Scale (398 individuals were actively participating in music groups and 102 in other activities);
- questionnaires for music participants at the end of the 9 month period (143);
- individual interviews with music participants (30);
- focus group interviews with music participants (15 focus group interviews);
- videos and observations of music sessions (45 videos, notes made of 25 sessions);
- videos and observations of musical performances (3);
- data relating to drop-outs from musical activities (records of the participating providers);
- questionnaires for music facilitators including two scales (assessment of views of successful leadership, Basic Needs Satisfaction at Work scale, Deci & Ryan, 2010) (14);
- interviews with music facilitators (12); and
- interviews with area co-ordinators of Age UK (responses representing the views of over 40 people concerned with the welfare of older people in all three partner areas).

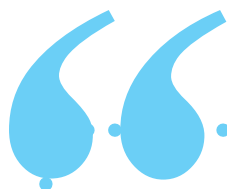
Eighty percent of the musical group sample was female and the majority was white, despite attempts of the research team to recruit members of a range of ethnic minority groups. The age range was 50–93 with 246 members of the music group in the Third age and 92 in the Fourth age. The majority of those participating in the music groups had been involved in professional occupations. There was no statistically significant difference in this respect between the music participants and those in the other groups.

Seventy-six percent of those in the musical groups had some kind of prior musical experiences. Twenty-nine percent classed themselves as musical beginners. Only 4% described themselves as 'very good', while the remainder described themselves as either average or good. Seventy three percent indicated that they could read music but for most this was at a basic level. Only 8% reported that they had 'very good' reading skills.

Some music group participants took part in other activities, the most common being some kind of physical activity, e.g. walking, rambling, dancing, yoga, keep fit.

The participants in the non-music groups were asked how important music was in their lives. Eleven percent reported that music played a central role in their lives; for the remainder music had 'no importance' or they 'listened to music from time to time'.

The participants in the music groups had a wide range of musical preferences, the strongest preference being for classical music, the least popular being reggae and electronic music.



From time to time I suffer anxiety, I am very grateful that in the last 5 years the Sage Silver Programme has proved to be so interesting, stimulating and a safe haven. The activities give structure to my life, a sense of belonging, and a stimulating environment in which to move and connect.

I left work through stress and lost confidence in everything. I didn't want to meet people or go out but after a while was persuaded to join the Silver Singers (my husband had joined when he was made redundant). Even after the first session I felt uplifted and cheered up and over the weeks and months felt life was great.

The freedom to enjoy and participate in music has changed my life dramatically.

As prime carer for parents with Alzheimer's disease, I am sometimes stressed. All stress leaves me when participating in musical activities and I leave with a spring in my step. This rubs off on my parents as I often sing to them or play my ukulele for them when visiting them or having them to my house.

For many years I have suffered periodic bouts of depression. Since being welcomed into the Silver Programme at the Sage I am happy to report that I have been depression free. Unless you have this condition you cannot imagine what a blessed relief it is to be without it for almost a year.

It keeps me active, alert and organised. It allows me to use and build on previous experience.

A new challenge taken up in retirement. I feel it is important to continue to try new things in older age and not be prepared to feel de-skilled as this ultimately is a sign of confidence.

Music is proving to be an amazing enjoyable opportunity for me in retirement. It is both mentally challenging and socially involving.

Has helped me to know that whatever age you are there is still something new and magic out there to enjoy.

My husband died suddenly over 2 years ago and I found the participation in the singing and an instrumental group was one of the greatest supports in my life. Singing is always uplifting and it is difficult to be sad while playing the ukulele.

For people like me who live alone outside activities are very important, if not an essential part of life. They give us a chance to meet people, make new friends, socialise, as well as learning new skills which give us a sense of achievement.

I think you feel support from everybody. If there is a concert, we are altogether in it and you feel everybody is there for you.

There is definitely something in performing in a group, equal with everyone, and you come out with a product at the end of it.





Recommendations

Opportunities for active music making need to be made available locally. These need to be open access (no prior experience required, no auditions). There need to be opportunities for progression from beginner to more advanced levels. Active music making for older people should not be restricted to choir; opportunities should be available for older people to take part in instrumental groups, making use of instruments such as ukulele, guitar, recorder, steel pans and others that are appropriate for beginner groups and for progression. Active music making for older people should include a range of musical genres, providing participants with opportunities to express their musical preferences and to re-engage with music from their youth. Opportunities need to be made available for intergenerational work. Participants need to be given learning goals and opportunities to perform. Facilitators need to receive training specifically for working with adults to include the inappropriateness of holding 'deficit' models of aging which can lead them to underestimate the capabilities of older people and not offer them sufficient challenge. The profile of working with older people needs to be raised so that facilitators can be recruited more easily.



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