

Agency over ageism: Music participation for people living with dementia

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INTRODUCTION

Ageism – a discriminatory bias based on age (Ribera-Casado, 2024)

Agency – the ability to act or effect change (van der Byl Williams, 2023); in a context of dementia, agency can be broadened to mean “assisted autonomy” within a supportive environment (Boyle, 2014) and can involve multiple dimensions, including “actions being meaningful and expressing something about the individual” (p.45, van der Byl Williams, 2023).

Combating ageism is a significant theme in the United Nations (UN) *Decade of Healthy Ageing: Plan of Action*. 2021-2030 has been declared the “Decade of Healthy Ageing” by the UN in response to the World Health Organization’s (WHO) prediction that between 2020 and 2050 the human population over the age of 60 will have doubled to 2.1 billion, with the number of people over 80 tripling to 426 million (WHO, 2025). Ageism is a pervasive societal problem and can be heightened when combined with the stigma of dementia (Innes et al., 2024; Tamburri et al., 2020). Research has shown that people living with dementia feel a sense of diminished agency (Bosco et al., 2019). We suggest that ageism can be reduced in part by fostering agency in older people through psychosocial programming like choral music. Considering rising dementia rates in Canada (Alzheimer’s Society of Canada, 2024), practitioners across numerous disciplines can play a vital role in nurturing agency and reducing ageism in contributing to healthy ageing in Canada. Based on findings from Intergenerational Choral Connections, a longitudinal research study, this poster aims to demonstrate how choral singing can play a role in fostering agency and dismantling ageism, thus contributing to elder wellbeing.

PROGRAM PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION

Research Aim: to capture the wellbeing, educational, and therapeutic impact of intergenerational choral rehearsals on high school students, university students, seniors in long-term care facilities, and their caregivers.

Description: The Timeless Voices intergenerational choir is a community outreach and research program from the University of Saskatchewan. It runs in 8-week iterations during which participants meet weekly to rehearse music and prepare a showcase concert for family and friends. Knowing that the singing voice can be a means through which to foster agency (Lang, 2020), program facilitators emphasize reciprocal learning across the generations and welcome participants’ ideas and interactions during rehearsals as the group works toward a showcase at the end of each iteration. Blending choral music expertise with psychology of aging, the facilitators aim to create a space in which all participants have a valued voice and meaningful relationships across generations can grow.

This project employs a qualitative methodology in which semi-structured interviews are conducted after each iteration with participant volunteers to capture their narratives and perceptions.



PARTICIPANT RESPONSES: AGENCY ELEVATED

“It feels like a **real choir**, because it is. It’s not something that’s being done as a facade. It’s a **serious, joyful engagement** ...No one’s auditioned. No one has to meet a certain level, but there isn’t a surprise if someone meets that level or **rises above**, because why wouldn’t they?” (*Volunteer*)

Through this choir, “[my husband] and I have **found our voices**.” (*Family care partner*)

“A lot of elders who tend to be worried or easily confused or distracted about things, when they come [to choir], it’s like a place for them to sit and **grow** in some soil for a bit. Clearly, they are very **enriched** by it...” (*Volunteer*)

“But it was also **learning** something ...and not dumbing it down, just because some people have massive cognitive impairment, which I thought was great. And everyone can **rise to the occasion** or not...there’s **something for everybody**.” (*Family care partner*)

PARTICIPANT RESPONSES: AGEISM REDUCED

“I enjoy [the students’] company. They’re **alive!**” (*Senior*)

“For me it was more about seeing how these elders could still **carry so much life** through music... Seeing music bring back a part of their **personality** that maybe wasn’t visible before, that’s really special to get to witness, and I’m really grateful that I was able to see that.” (*Student*)

“There’s a sense of community, not just for the elders but for us... I don’t have grandparents, so I don’t interact with older people, so having that **connection** is really important, right? Not to just interact with people my age but to **seek the wisdom of others, from other life times**.” (*Student*)

By being part of the choir, the students learn that “the elders are still alive. Elders have something to offer. Companionship. Working together.” (*Senior*)

CONCLUSION

Participants’ responses suggest that this program contributes to healthy ageing for its senior members. As relationships are built between students and their elder choir partners through working together on a meaningful and creative project, aspects of ageism are dismantled. Students see their elder partners as friends and fellow humans in a different stage of life. As participants’ voices are honoured, ideas welcomed, and accomplishments celebrated, agency is fostered. All cohorts work together to develop an exciting showcase of which to be proud.



Future research directions may consider biophysical measurements to investigate benefits of choral singing on physical wellbeing.

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