Music education opportunities for older people: a case study from Macao

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Abstract

This article describes education and training in music for older people in the Seniors Academy of the Macao Polytechnic Institute. Relevant literature and documents were studied to investigate context; focused interviews were conducted with students of the Seniors Academy to collect views on provision and on the effects of music education on health and wellness. Findings indicate that the music education programmes offered in The Macao Polytechnic Institute are practical, popular, seem to have substantial social value and are viewed by older people as contributing to a healthy life. However, there is plenty of room for further development. The article concludes with a discussion of implications for the sustainable development of music education for older people in Macao.

Introduction

There have been many claims that active participation in music activities can lead to measurable improvements in the well-being of older people (Bittman, 2009; Lee & Choi, 2009; Lehtonen, 2002; Tims, 1999). In fact, evidence of music ameliorating loneliness, depression and the effects of Alzheimer’s/Parkinson’s disease among older people, and even improving the functioning of the immune system, has been reported in the literature (Bunt, 1994; Kumar et al., 1999; Friedman, 2009). Besides, as an established rehabilitation discipline, music therapy has long been using music to help people of all ages in improving their physical, emotional, and spiritual health (American Music Therapy Association, 2009; Music Therapy Association of British Columbia, 2009; Tomaino, 2009).

Given this increasing awareness of a link between participation in music activities and health and well-being, this article presents a case study of the provision of music education at the Seniors Academy of the Macao Polytechnic Institute. The purpose of the case study is two-fold 1) to review empirical evidence from older students on their experience of music education in the Seniors Academy and their perceptions of its effect on their health and well-being; 2) to consider the arguments, arising from this review, for development of the Senior Academy’s music programme.
Music Learning Opportunities for Citizens of Macao

Since the return of sovereignty to China, the Macao Special Administrative Region (Macao SAR) government has been committed, in line with other parts of China, to the promotion of arts education which aims at enhancing its citizens’ cultural literacy and awareness (Macao Daily News 2006a). In recent years, the Cultural Affairs Bureau of Macao has been proactively providing training in various arts forms (through the development of a Conservatory) and has been promoting cultural events (for example, the Macao International Music Festival, the Macao Arts Festival and the Macao Young Musicians Competition). However, most learning opportunities in the arts have been developed for young people and students; the provision of opportunities for adults is relatively minimal. Adults desiring to learn music (whether music theory, musical instruments or singing) have had to resort to private sector tuition at musical instruments stores and private music teaching studios. Increasing numbers of adults have done so. Informal and non-formal music learning opportunities do exist. Some adult learners are joining community performing groups to increase their exposure and experience in music (Macao Daily News 2006b). There are groups concerned with different music genres (e.g. Cantonese operatic singing, Chinese musical instruments, choral singing) organised by community societies and associations (e.g. the Chinese Educators Association of Macao, the Macao Federation of Workers, the Macao District Association) and community/amateur performing arts organisations (e.g. the Jin Yan Operatic Arts Club, the Yue Yi Xuan Operatic Arts Club, the Association for Cantonese Operatic Arts). However, with regard to formal learning opportunities specifically for older people, the Seniors Academy of the Macao Polytechnic Institute is currently the only providing institution in Macao.

Case study - Music programme offered by the Seniors Academy of the Macao Polytechnic Institute

Overview

The Seniors Academy established in November 1999, is the first institution of higher education in Macao offering formal education and training for older people. The objectives of the Seniors Academy are:

• to put the idea of continuing education for senior citizens into practice;
• to give them an opportunity to go back to school;
• to enrich and renew their knowledge;
• to enhance their life expectations.

(Macao Polytechnic Institute 2009)

Given these objectives, the Seniors Academy has been providing a wide range of courses for older people in subject areas including computer science, languages, technologies, arts and health education. In addition to formal courses, the Seniors Academy also organises a number of activities and complementary interest groups such as choral singing, learning musical instruments and traditional Chinese dancing.
etc. In August 2009, the Seniors Academy was offering 25 subjects and 23 activities and interest groups which made up a total of 54 classes with 478 enrolments (around 1 per cent of total population of eligible older people).

To be eligible for admission to the programme of the Seniors Academy, all applicants must be 55 years old or over, be able to read and write in the Chinese Language and to pay the fee required. There are no other specific requirements. The Academy’s programmes are extremely popular; a large number of applications are received and the number of applicants often far outnumbers the available places. Admission is, ultimately, decided by lottery.

All courses and activities are conducted in daytime at the campus of the Macao Polytechnic Institute. The annual (two semesters) tuition fee for each course and activity is modest. To maintain equal opportunity of education for applicants, each one can enrol for, at most, only four courses/activities in each academic year. In addition, each student admitted is allowed to maintain their enrolment for not more than four years. Since academic attainment is not the prime objective of the Seniors Academy programme, formal assessments are not required but certificates of attendance (formal courses only, excluding activities and interest groups) are issued to students whose attendance rate has reached 75 per cent or above.

The music programme

Table 1 below illustrates the formal courses, activities and interest groups in music being offered in the Seniors Academy.

**Table 1: Music programme in the Seniors Academy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Programme type</th>
<th>Course title</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Duration (hours per semester)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal course</td>
<td>Traditional Chinese Opera</td>
<td>• Elementary</td>
<td>24 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Intermediate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music Activities</td>
<td>Choral singing</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>22 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese Musical Instrument (Yangqin)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>22 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese Musical Instrument (Erhu &amp; Qinqin)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>22 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music movement &amp; dance interest groups</td>
<td>Ballroom Dancing</td>
<td>• Elementary</td>
<td>20 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Intermediate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physique Dance</td>
<td>• Elementary</td>
<td>21 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Intermediate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chinese Dance</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>17 hours</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There is one formal course, in traditional Chinese opera, offered at two levels. The tuition offered in Chinese musical instruments, as part of the activities programme, comprises the *yangqin*, a Chinese hammered dulcimer originally from Central Asia; the *erhu*, a two-stringed bowed musical instrument used both as a solo and ensemble instrument and the *qinqin*, a plucked string instrument, commonly used in the regional music of Guangdong province and the Chaozhou region. The course description for the erhu/qingqin class is expansive and states that its “purpose is very simple … to make some interesting like-minded friends… [It is] about fulfilling spiritual life in later years”. It goes on to associate the class with “disease prevention, special fitness function, physical and mental pleasure, a vivid stimulated brain function” and even concludes with the notable claim that it has “a good supporting role in the prevention of Alzheimer's disease”. The interest group ‘Physique Dance’ has some parallels in Western aerobics and includes such features as posture, breathing, heart and body function and general fitness – all to varying lively musical styles. ‘Chinese Dance’ includes both classical and folk dance as well as “cultivation of emotional and aesthetic taste”. Diverse though the music programme is, it is only around 9 per cent of the overall provision of the Senior Academy.

**Interviews with students of the Seniors Academy**

To collect views about the current provision of music learning at the Seniors Academy and perceptions of the effects of learning music on the health and well-being of older people, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 randomly selected students (six male, six female) from the full range of classes and activities in the music programme. This was about 25 per cent of participants in music in the Seniors Academy of that year. These interviewees had studied at the Seniors Academy for between one to four years. They were invited to provide responses to a series of questions about: 1) content and quality of the music programme; 2) teaching facilities, venues and programme arrangements; 3) perceptions of the effects of attendance at the music programme on physical and mental well-being; 4) improvements and suggestions recommended.

**Content and quality**

Students interviewed expressed themselves as generally satisfied with the courses/activities, design and the mode of delivery in the music programme. A few students commented that the duration of courses/activities was too short:

- *I think one lesson (two hours) per week is just too little* (Student A).
- *12 lessons per semester are too few* (Student D).

Most students thought that the courses/activities which they had attended met their post-retirement wishes and needs with regard to learning and that the level of the courses/activities was appropriate to their ability.
Teaching facilities, venues and programme arrangements

All the older students said that the Seniors Academy had created an excellent environment of classes in which they could learn comfortably and effectively. The teaching rooms, they thought, were well-equipped for learning activities of different types; course tutors/activity coaches were well prepared; instructional strategies, materials and progressions were adequately adjusted to match the characteristics and abilities of older students and most importantly, the tuition fees were inexpensive and affordable for most retirees.

Perceptions of the effects of attendance at the music programme on physical and mental well-being

Most students felt that studying music or participation in music activities at the Seniors Academy had been very beneficial for them. Quotations from all 12 students are included in this section.

Some students simply spoke of increased happiness. One student observed

*I think learning music can bring me enjoyment and fun* (Student B).

Another made the connection between music and ‘joy’ and

*felt that singing can bring me joy* (Student C).

The positive links between music, health and happiness recurred throughout the interviews and the interviewees had different perspectives to express and different metaphors to use. Several thought that both their health and happiness improved since their participation in musical activities. One spoke of energy levels:

*I feel very comfortable and full of energy since taking the chorus activity* (Student A).

Others coupled reported improvements in physical health with feelings of increased happiness:

*I think music and movement activities are helpful in preserving my physical health; in addition, having exercise with music is motivating which can bring about pleasant feelings* (Student J).

*Physique Dance activity is really effective in improving my health and fitness and in keeping a good mood. I used to get sick very often, but the situation improved a lot since taking dance activities* (Student K).

One student felt that music made a contribution “all the time”:

*I think music [activities] are able to benefit both my physical and psychological health, I feel in a good mood all the time* (Student L).
Indeed, the ways in which some of the students expressed themselves indicated that they believed that music participation had rescued them, if not from depression, at least from poor spirits:

Since learning Erhu and QinQin, I feel comfortable both physically and mentally, Learning a musical instrument can help in raising my spirit (Student D).

Since taking the Chinese Operatic Singing course, I have been in a cheerful mood, I felt much happier (Student H).

Another student reported that music had brought a “merrier spirit” and, with it, improved “focus”:

From the perspective of physical and mental health, music [learning] has bought me a merrier spirit; I can stay focused much longer on things (Student E).

Another student linked improvement in well-being to being busy in spare time

[Music learning] not only can keep my spare time occupied, more importantly, I feel much more cheerful and my spirit is elevated (Student G).

A “dynamic” brain was how one student described the current happy state induced by music learning:

Music learning brings me happiness, and concurrently maintains my brain in a dynamic state (Student F).

A student engaged in a formal music course felt that

My physical and psychological states are superior since taking the Traditional Chinese Opera Study, my spirits are lifted and my confidence is raised (Student I).

**Improvements and suggestions**

Four interviewees felt that the duration of courses/activities (17-24 hours per semester) in the Seniors Academy should at least be doubled.

I will be much satisfied if we can two lessons per week (Student A).

[I] hope that, ideally, one more lesson per week can be added (Student D).

[I] hope that the duration of lessons can be doubled (Student E).

I think it will be much ideal if the Erhu class can have one more lesson [per week] added (Student F).
Two interviewees suggested that some courses/activities should be offered at different levels of study (e.g. Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced) so as to provide opportunities for advanced learning:

*At present, only one Erhu class is being offered, I hope Erhu classes of different levels—say low, median and high can be offered so that students can have the opportunity to take higher level classes* (Student E).

*The Traditional Chinese Opera Study class is now offering two levels of study, the continuity of learning can better be maintained if a further level of study is available* (Student I).

Furthermore, all interviewees commented that the number of study places currently provided by the Seniors Academy were insufficient to meet the increasing demand and that they knew of lots of complaints from applicants who were unable to attend. All shared a common aspiration that the government could allocate extra resources to the Seniors Academy to enlarge the scale of learning opportunities for older citizens of Macao.

**Discussion**

The analysis of the interviews with the 12 music students of the Seniors Academy showed that all claimed that the process of music learning increased their feelings of physical and mental well-being. Some made stronger claims, that music learning had improved their physical and psychological health. It is reasonable to give some credence to these self-reported findings and to suppose that the interviewees’ perceptions and reports would be echoed by many of their fellows. The relationship between perceptions of health and actual health is, no doubt, complex and multi-dimensional, but it seems logical to proceed to initial thoughts about links between modest expansion of the music programme and possible savings in the enormous cost of healthcare for older people.

Most interviewees were also grateful that the Seniors Academy was able to provide them with a variety of courses/activities to enrich both their knowledge and life in retirement. In particular, they valued being regarded as students of the Macao Polytechnic Institute equally with other students in the regular programmes of study. The Seniors Academy was recognised by these interviewees as providing great encouragement and motivation for older people like themselves as they returned to learning. It assisted them in their retirement in maintaining or regaining self-esteem and confidence.

**Conclusions**

Along with the advancement of medical technologies, the improvement of public health and the treatment of chronic diseases have extended people’s lives. The trend towards an ageing population is therefore inevitable. Population ageing has
aroused extensive concern all over the world and Macao already justifies the title of an ageing society (Tian 2004). According to the statistics from the most recent census, 7.2 per cent (approximately 39,542 people) of the entire population of Macao are 65 years old and above (Macao SAR Government 2009b).

While sustaining the longevity of life, undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges which the Macao SAR government now faces is that of enabling older people to live healthier lives with good physical function and quality of life. The scientific studies reported at the beginning of this article have, indicated, at least, that music activities can contribute to the health and well-being of older people. The interview study with older people in the Seniors Academy shows that interviewees report that participation in music activities maintains and improves their physical and mental health. It is, therefore, worth considering promotion of participation in musical activity as health-care for older people. In Macao, free medical care is provided to citizens who are 65 years old and above (Macao SAR Government 2009a). If participation in musical activities does contribute to the health and well-being of older people, and even, potentially, to reducing health-care costs, then claims for additional resource for expansion of music programmes for older people are on strong grounds.

There may be dual benefits. On the one hand, music education can enrich the cultural life of older people; on the other hand, it might diminish, even if only marginally, the demands on medical and health resources. In reality, the resources used in a music programme such as that in the Seniors Academy are miniscule when compared to those consumed by medical and health budgets for older people.

In the past decade, the Seniors Academy of the Macao Polytechnic Institute has been playing an important, successful and prominent role in providing learning opportunities for older people in Macao. Nevertheless, the scale of current provision is obviously inadequate for the social progress of an ageing society in development. The potential of the Seniors Academy has not fully been realised, particularly in the provision of music learning. Ideally, provision should be flexibly adjusted to actual demand. Some sharing of facilities between the Seniors Academy and constituent academic units of Macao Polytechnic Institute would contribute to reduction of costs but it will inevitably require additional resource from the government’s recurrent budget. Indeed, on the basis of the evidence and arguments advanced in this article, it seems evident that the Macao SAR government should consider promotion of participation in musical activities as part of future policy planning for the health and well-being of older people.

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References


**Keywords**


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