

# Rethinking, Re-storying, and Reclaiming Narratives of Aging in Music Education Research<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In this article, I address the contemporary discussion of later-life courses in music education research and how it might perpetuate the discrimination and stereotyping of older adults. Drawing from the sociology of aging, I aim to show that one possible way to tackle the ageist assumptions in music education is to reflect on rethinking, re-storying, and reclaiming the master narratives of aging by replacing the dominant linear life span view with an intersectional life course approach. Furthermore, I will present ideas to connect qualitative narrative inquiry with systems thinking, to challenge the practices and research traditions that contribute to the sustainment of stereotypical mental models of aging in music education and move towards a framework of sustainable aging. Finally, the transformative potential of such inquiry will benefit not only music educators interested in later-life questions but also the field at large. The music education of young children, for instance, can be seen as an investment in the musical agency of future older people.

## Keywords

Aging, life course, music education, narrative, systems thinking

How are later-life courses storied in music education research? As the focus of music learning and teaching has shifted from what is taught to who is included in the teaching and learning processes, individuals and social groups at “the margins” (Talbot 2018) and the subsequent methodological responsibility of the researchers (Kallio 2020) have become primary considerations of music education research. In this article, I raise the problem that, despite the common ideal of *lifelong learning*, music education tends to emphasize the learning of children and young people and defend the place of music in the school curriculum while neglecting the responsibility music educators hold for acquiring lasting values and attitudes towards music among the whole population (Pitts 2017), including older adults. As Stephanie Pitts (2017) argues, music educators ought to become more aware of “their contribution to lifelong musical engagement, and of the risks, challenges and opportunities inherent in the shaping of musical lives” (Pitts 2017, 160). However, as a recent extensive literature review shows, music education for older adults is mostly connected with and justified by the instrumental value of music via cognitive, physical, and social wellbeing benefits, while lacking critical aspects and a more holistic approach to lifelong music learning and education (Laes and Creech 2023), further confirming the presumption of older adults as in need of care rather than empowerment (Laes 2015). Thus, the call for music education research to develop “a continuum of questions, perspectives, and dynamic principles and applications that radically challenge existing assumptions” (Myers 2008, 1) does not extend to older adult music education. The narrow and stereotypical view of the aging population is not specific to music education but can be examined as *a systemic problem*: the result of general agism—in other words, the socio-historical, political, and economic context in which individuals become a “problem group” as they age (Estes 2020), especially in capitalist societies in the global West. Indeed, of all the marginalized intersectional identities, aging has been identified as one of the most neglected and critically under-discussed areas in research on social inequality (Holman and Walker 2021, Gilleard and Higgs 2014). The focus is mainly on the problem of aging, on the one hand, as a period of deterioration with responsibility falling to the individual to mask and slow down the effects of aging (Hunt 2017, 254), and on the other hand, as a societal burden that demands public scrutiny and control (Estes, Biggs, and Phillipson 2003, 66). Music education is unavoidably part of this systemic problem. As music education scholar Brent Talbot (2018) argues:

Music education, with all its potential for naming, decoding, expressing, and addressing social issues, for all its potential for enacting change, for all its opportunity for participation, collaboration, and creativity, chooses to perpetuate an exclusionary system steeped in classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, genderism, ableism, and ageism. (5)

Aging naturally concerns everyone—at the same time, the conscious othering of older people from the center of critical research and practice creates a paradoxical prejudice against our future older selves (see Nelson 2005). Hence, the central challenge taken up in this article is to understand, through systems thinking, the character in the treatment of older adults in music education research and to connect these notions to broader research trends related to aging, with the intent of offering a new vision of *sustainable aging* in and through music education.

Several scholars in our field have emphasized the importance of learning and participation throughout the life course (e.g. Myers 1995; Mantie and Tucker 2008; Lamont 2011; Mantie 2012; Laes 2015; Creech, Varvarigou, and Hallam 2020; Mantie, Dubé, and Barbeau 2021). However, expanding the diverse potential of lifelong music education requires considering the narrow approach and discriminative nature of contemporary lifelong learning policies, broadly problematized in educational theory (e.g., Biesta 2006) and gerontology (e.g., Findsen and Formosa 2011) but less in music education. For example, along with its policy changes over the last decades, UNESCO has shifted the focus of its lifelong learning agenda from *learning to be* (Faure et al. 1972), as a humanist educational aim, towards the utilitarian value of learning to be employable and valuable for a neoliberal capitalist society (Biesta 2006, 2010; see also Regmi 2015). This shift in the discourse of lifelong learning disproportionately affects retired older adults, whose right to participate in education must be justified outside the service of working life (Findsen and Formosa 2011). In music education, such legitimacy demands have been addressed by emphasizing the assumed health and wellbeing benefits of music for older adults, which entails a risk of reducing music to instrumentalizing aims (e.g., Parr 2017) as part of the increasingly popular yet problematic *neuromyth* discourse that uncritically claims that any musical engagement promotes wellbeing on brain level (Odendaal, Levänen, and Westerlund 2018). This discourse can indeed be called a myth, as studies show that there is “no direct unconditional causal link between music and wellbeing, as a complex number of factors and experiences contribute to the wellbeing that is associated with musical engagement” (13).

These aforementioned societal trends—problematization of aging, commodification of lifelong learning, and instrumentalization of music as a mere provider of health benefits—together represent a risk of decreasing opportunities for high-quality music education in later life and lead to several considerations related to music education professionalism. First, the current wellbeing trends require music educators to consider their professional purpose and responsibility in broader contexts than those traditionally ascribed to music education (Koivisto and Laes 2022, 187). Second, regarding the increasing number of aged people in many societies, music educators must pay more attention to the “holistic vision of relevance” of lifelong engagement in music “that embraces intrinsic values of the arts for the world's citizens” (Myers 2008, 2). Third, these trends may also have an impact on resources when music education, along with other arts and cultural fields, must abandon their traditional role first and foremost as educational institutions and instead “demonstrate their ability to promote social inclusion, tackle issues of cultural deprivation and disadvantage, and reach the widest possible audience” (Belfiore 2002, 106). This development has been claimed to warrant a risk of losing the autonomous economic provision for arts and culture and instead becoming absorbed within existing social policies (Belfiore 2002).

Nevertheless, the aged population will be an increasingly significant target of service in the field of leisure activities and liberal arts education, as many European countries, along with Japan, South Korea, China, the USA, and Australia, are confronting the demographic development of *super-aged societies* (United Nations 2019). This development demands further investigation of the mismatch between embodied, self-defined aging identities and the cultural master narratives of aging within educational contexts. What expectations do we, as music education researchers and practitioners, imply in the dominant narratives of music education in later life? Furthermore, how do those master narratives operate to shape—often beyond our conscious recognition—what or who is valued and served within the collective and systemic levels of services, institutional practices, and professional education? These questions relate to the existing aging discourses and raise broader and deeper issues about how the human experience is understood amidst the complex social systems (Jackson 2019) with which music is intertwined in many different ways.

Challenging the practices and research traditions that contribute to the renewal of stereotypical mental models of aging in music education can support a

framework for *sustainable aging* in and for society (Laes and Schmidt 2021). A vision of sustainable aging celebrates interdependencies instead of categorizing age cohorts separately from each other and acknowledges *care*, not as a burden, but as “a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life” (Chatzidakis et al. 2020, 5). The key to such a vision is how we, as music educators and researchers, frame aging narratives, help re-author life courses, and maintain a connection with other generations by understanding how individual life circumstances are intrinsically intertwined with others. Hence, instead of relying on abstract descriptions of the needs and concerns of the aged population, the discursive shift toward sustainable aging benefits the most from the transformational power of narratives that not only concern the individuals telling and sharing their stories but also indicates the complex systems that are created, maintained, and changed through narratives. In this article, I rely on Jerome Bruner’s (1991, 2002) understanding of narrative as a construction of reality. Bruner’s approach to narrative is multidimensional, stressing that narrative is not just a linguistic activity but also a construction of reality that actively involves our social, natural, and material world. According to Bruner, narratives shape our perception and interpretation of reality, individually and collectively. Narratives not only represent reality by spoken or written descriptions but also constitute reality by operating as “an instrument of mind” (Bruner 1991, 5–6), shaping the individual and collective mental models. Bruner (1991) further explains,

We organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on. Narrative is a conventional form, transmitted culturally and constrained by each individual's level of mastery... Narratives ... are a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and “narrative necessity” rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness. (4)

Hence, narratives are seen here as the reproduction of past events and as tools that produce action and material reality (Westerlund 2020). Leaning on pragmatist philosophy, Heidi Westerlund (2020) proposes *future narratives* in music education as “narrative power in the context of action, recurrent activities and events that aim at adapting transformative professionalism, and teacher activism to one’s position as a researcher” (8). To this end, I will present how connecting narratives with systems thinking may create transformative practice in music education. The need for transformation is based on three premises: first, the harmful narratives

at the heart of generally negative views on aging are a complex problem that affects not only the current aging population but also intertwines with many other relationships and connections between different social sub-systems affecting our everyday lives, institutional structures, and professional practices (Meadows 1982; Estes, Biggs, and Phillipson 2003), including music education. Second, the current lifelong learning discourse calls for working towards new narratives (Diehl, Smyer, and Mehrotra 2020) that can consolidate the diversity of life courses as well as address the need for intergenerational solidarity, in which music education can play an important role. Third, instead of handing over the professional responsibility regarding older adults' musical participation for health and wellbeing sectors, music education professionals can contribute to sustainable aging by promoting the transformative possibilities of musical life courses in the policies, practices, and research of music education.

## Master Narratives of Aging

Once the loss of capability to see, hear, or walk starts, you become—to your family, to yourself, and wider society—an “old lady” with all the presumptions that go with that. You lose the force of your personality, in other people's minds and often your own. You shrink back, and are diminished. Your place in society will have shifted to that of a user of services designed especially for you, but not in any way good enough, or imaginative enough, to make it possible for you to live your life as it was before. (Neuberger 2009, 113)

This view of becoming old is, to a certain extent, a typical social imaginary realized mainly through “individualized struggles over revealing or concealing the abjection of old age” (Gilleard and Higgs 2014, xii). The cultural master narratives of aging as loss, decline, and invisibility are not necessarily universal but are very recognizable. These narratives are further masked by maintaining “the binary of youth versus age,” where “successful” aging equals disciplining old bodies toward “not becoming old” (Gilleard and Higgs 2014, 153–54). On the one hand, the master narratives are perpetuated in news and entertainment media, politics, art, literature, and everyday interactions. On the other hand, these master narratives can be shaped and changed by consciously making space for alternative voices and engaging in professional responsibility by challenging oneself to critical “interpretive activity” instead of “keeping with the canon” (Bruner 1991, 9). Thinking professionally and responsibly about lifelong music educational possibilities, including in, and for, later life, should not be the mission of another special interest group or



advocacy work through detecting and manifesting collective empowerment narratives on aging. Instead, it should be seen as something that penetrates the field as a whole; following the idea of sustainable aging, music education of the young is an investment in the *musical possible selves* (Creech, Varvarigou, and Hallam 2020) of their future versions.

Due to the the global trend of a steadily increasing rise in population aging (United Nations 2019), there is a growing interest in improving the wellbeing in later life among researchers and political decision-makers. It is both an individual and a societal benefit to consider how to ensure wellbeing throughout our expanding decades of life. However, research on the wellbeing of older people has traditionally focused on physical activity and economic wellbeing, while the socially and culturally constructed conception of aging and its impact on individually perceived wellbeing has received less attention (Bengtson 2016). The demand for active citizenship is primarily based on externally defined goals to stay active and control the aging process. It has been endorsed in the studies of older adults and adopted as part of political rhetoric. The so-called *new aging* (Gilleard and Higgs 2014) features practices such as anti-aging consumerism and the busy lifestyle of the *third age* (the concept first coined by Peter Laslett (1991) used to denote an active lifestyle committed to positive and successful ageing), especially in the global West. Despite differences in socioeconomic conditions and local protection systems for individuals aging with a disability or in poverty, old age in general increases the risk of social exclusion and lack of a sense of purpose. Hence, the quality of life of older people is increasingly determined by the social dimensions of life, individually experienced meaningfulness, and a sense of purpose.

Social gerontologists have addressed the need for a change in treating aged populations. For example, Calasanti and King (2020) call for a paradigm shift that avoids treating old age as a problem, avoids medicalizing the natural effects of aging, and instead treats the “problems” of old age as results of age relations. Carol Estes (2020) reminds us how experiencing aging is influenced by the treatment and location of elders in society. Furthermore, Diehl, Smyer, and Mehrotra (2020) assert that changing individuals’ negative views of aging calls for developing a *new narrative on aging* that incorporates the diversity of the aging population. While some music educators have shown interest in the social challenges among older adults and the opportunities offered by musical activities, it is noticeable that these interests appear to be singular and sporadic, without considering the broader

systemic ways that music education can sustain holistic wellbeing, continuous self-development, and communal life environments for current and future aging populations.

## An Intersectional Life Course Perspective

Western societies have largely adopted a linear, chronological view of aging that defines the right age for starting a career, having a family, and retiring from work. Consequently, the perspective on old age has remained narrowly individual, lacking societal relevance beyond work life. According to life course theorists, however, an integrated approach to the life course and its various dimensions, trajectories, and transitions enables methodological pluralism and recognizes the need to bridge macro and micro levels of theory and analysis in understanding aging systemically (Hunt 2017, 33). The life course approach understands *age as cumulative* rather than linear; in other words, a person has many ages simultaneously, as past experiences and life events in different ages intertwine and produce a layered age identity that changes and adapts throughout one's life course and transitions, including an imaginary space for our future older selves (Hunt 2017, 24–25). This perspective contradicts the view of old age as a distinct phase of life, disengaged from the preceding life course (Holman and Walker 2021). In social gerontology, the life course perspective has offered new avenues to examine human development as a lifelong process; it emphasizes the interdependence of individuals and generations, the nature and timing of significant life transitions, and the historical and cultural contexts (Bengtson 2016). The life course theory also transforms the perspective on educational planning and development along with the global transition to higher levels of life expectancy both in economically wealthy and in developing countries (Robine 2021) that shifts the demographics, culture, and politics of societies. Human lives are no longer comprised of simplistic categories from education to career and retirement. This three-stage lifespan concept is based on a strongly dominant developmental and social-psychological interpretation and has resulted in the socially constructed segregative treatment of children and adults—“divisions based on chronological age” that “vary from context to context in their salience and boundaries” (Biggs and Lowenstein 2011, 144).

Formal music education often takes selective, age-specific forms through age-categorized pedagogical solutions, institutional and teacher education structures specialize in early childhood/adult/older adult programs, upper age limits for



applying to music schools, and a prevailing view of the importance of starting music learning at a young age that fits well in the institutional master-apprentice model (e.g. Allsup 2016). These forms perpetuate generation gaps and the emotional divide between the young and the old. However, the young/old binary is irrelevant to many other forms of musical participation. For example, in informal music practices and contexts where interfaces of age, sexuality, nationality, and ability are blurred, the generation gaps are considerably narrower and “set apart from the dominant structures” (Gardner and Jennings 2020, 89). Consequently, new successful programs for intergenerational music making outside the conservatory context are increasingly developed (e.g., David et al. 2018; Belgrave and Keown 2018; Varvarigou et al. 2011). Considering music education and/or music leisure for older adults not as an activity for activity’s sake, but instead as involvement in educational experiences that provide meaning to their lives, moves it further from being “another ‘successful aging’ strategy but rather, a concept with the potential to reorient society’s priorities and values” (Mantie, Dubé, and Barbeau 2021, 46). This reorientation, as Roger Mantie and colleagues (2021) describe, “is not just a form of resistance against ageism, but a form of resistance against all work-centric discourses” (46).

The work-centric way of thinking about life courses has derived from a predominantly masculine perspective of modernity and contemporary capitalism (Gilleard and Higgs 2014, Federici 2020, Escobar 2018). For instance, anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2018) states in his work on pluriversal politics—particularly in the global South—that “patriarchal capitalism” (14) is the main barrier to a radical transformation in the dominant models of life and economy that maintain inequity and oppression. Indeed, in a masculine-oriented world, women have mainly carried out intergenerational relationships through care relationships within families and public service structures. Simultaneously, the oppression of women continues in parallel with aging. Aging women ultimately face a societal double-rejection as both their reproduction and labor capacities decrease (Gilleard and Higgs 2014, vii–viii). This *social death* (Brennan 2019) takes place under a patriarchal gaze, a pervasive condition internalized already growing up as girls under the influence of a materialistic, over-individualistic, corporate capitalism (Gilleard and Higgs 2014, Federici 2020, Woodward 1999). Not only girls, but also young boys (and transgender individuals), are equally under a considerable amount of scrutiny to behave in hegemonic masculine (or feminine) ways. In capitalist,

youth-idealizing societies, the same patriarchal gaze that makes individuals hyper-visible in youth eventually makes them invisible as they age. The invisibility-hyper-visibility dilemma is well-known and criticized in disability studies, especially within the music and arts performance contexts (see Churchill and Laes 2021). Although aging cannot be directly considered a disability, the manifestation of this societal paradox reveals how aging identities are also being marginalized and disproportionately subject to discrimination. Therefore, internalizing and centering the intersectional life course perspective, where aging is understood as individually and socially multi-layered, may help to understand unequal aging (Holman and Walker 2020) and adopt this understanding into music education contexts.

### (Un)helpful Narratives?

Bruner (1991, 2002) believed that narratives play a critical role in the social construction of reality. They help establish shared meanings and social norms because they reflect the values, beliefs, and expectations of the society in which they are formed. Narratives are also materially constructed through our interactions with the physical world. They involve objects, places, and actions that strengthen the “verisimilitude” (Bruner 1991, 13)—the narrative’s *lifelikeness* which helps us relate the narrative to our own experiences of the concrete world. In this way, aging narratives provided by research, art, media, and entertainment form identities and an understanding of different social roles for older people. However, unexamined narratives can do much harm. For example, the mental models underlining the generally accepted goals of active aging amplify capitalistic utilitarian thinking and maintain a detrimental individualistic focus on the later life course. In point of the fact, Bruner stresses the heuristic process of narrative construction: it is not so much about telling the story as it is “to render previously familiar ones uncertain or problematical, challenging a reader into fresh interpretive activity” (Bruner 1991, 12–13).

As mentioned earlier, the need to develop transformative aging narratives has been observed in sociology (e.g., Estes, Biggs, and Phillipson 2003; Diehl, Smyer, and Mehrotra 2020; Holman and Walker 2021), but it has also been addressed in the narrative research tradition. According to narrative researcher Kate de Medeiros (2014), the dominance of one-dimensional aging narratives is perpetuated when older people are asked to tell their *life story* (rather than *self story*). It limits

the narrative forms available to the older individuals because *life story* inclines towards a chronological plot line and harmonized coherence and focuses on representing the individual's age over other dynamics of intersectional identities such as gender, sexuality, or political agency. Indeed, treating these social characteristics separately does not match the reality of individuals who simultaneously embody multiple characteristics and are potentially subject to various forms of discrimination. Nevertheless, the intersectionality perspective has primarily bypassed the nature of aging, or the concept of the life course, in multiple research fields (Holman and Walker 2021), including music education.

If music participation does feature in the studies of older adults, it is frequently narrated in wholly positive, paternalistic terms without giving voice to disagreement, discomfort, or the value of silent participation (Koivisto and Laes 2022). This dominating discourse of older adults in music education is best exemplified by a recent systematic literature review of nearly 70 research articles on older adults and music education published during the past decade. In this dataset, musical development and lifelong learning were the primary focus in only a few studies. One study addressed negative emotions and frustrations deriving from musical participation, while most studies manifested a *universal value of music in service of wellbeing*, including psychological, cognitive, emotional, physical, and social factors (Laes and Creech 2023). Although these studies highlighted diverse forms of agency, especially related to social participation in music and its personal meanings, for the most part, they assumed that active participation generates visible action and results toward successful and active aging. However, the aspiration of active aging is an elusive goal for many older adults—it is often presented without clearly articulating the resources or structures needed to support it, let alone whose goals are served (Jensen and Skjøtt-Larsen 2021). Furthermore, hardly any of the studies reported the participants' gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, cultural background, or dis/ability; hence, the participants were portrayed first and foremost as “retired” or “older adults” without addressing other intersectional dynamics of their identities (Laes and Creech 2023). Based on this systematic review, I posit that not enough attention has been paid to how, despite benevolent purposes, studies about music education for older adults can maintain harmful and stereotypical aging narratives.

Due to the narrow social identities available for older adults in youth-centered societies, participation in social and cultural activities may even be experienced as

a personal obligation to ensure the continuity of independent functioning and thus avoid burdening the younger generations. In other words, cultural or educational participation in later life can be perceived as both a right and a duty (see Biesta 2006). Cultural participation may also be made visible in status behavior or symbolic consumption, even though it is without a genuine experience of agency; for example, attending an opera or theatre play without having a genuine interest in the art form. From a statistical point of view, the individual appears as an active consumer of art. Therefore, participation alone cannot demonstrate a meaningful agency contributing to assumed wellbeing. Indeed, non-participation can also be seen as a form of agency through a conscious decision not to take part in the active and successful aging duty that requires visible but perhaps superficial participation in activities considered appropriate for older adults.

A less conventional set of stories was collected as part of an extensive survey of the retired population's participation in the arts and culture in Finland (Laes and Rautiainen 2022). Rather than focusing on culturally active participants, the supplementary interviews were conducted with those who, according to the survey, did not participate in the arts or cultural activities. These stories of the non-participants surprisingly demonstrated a hidden but strong sense of agency and deep connections with different art forms that emerged in less conventional ways and outside the public sphere. Thus, the commonly considered barriers to accessibility, such as economic or geographical factors, did not apply to these respondents. Instead, the reasons for non-participation were related to the discrepancy between personally meaningful experiences and socially constructed expectations of the accepted forms of participation maintained by societal structures, as well as suspicion toward the collectively adopted and internalized mental models of active aging. Another significant notion was that many respondents expressed reluctance to participate in targeted activities aimed at retired/senior citizens/older people (Laes and Rautiainen 2022). Avoiding these target group activities reflects a retirement trauma (Tornstram 2005), wherein a person experiences a conflict between their individually experienced identity and the narrow social role assigned to their age cohort. Hence, the non-participants' narratives can be re-storied by paying attention to multiple forms of participation, including silent participation as individually valuable and collectively acceptable, and intergenerational forms of participation as a more feasible way to support sustainable aging.

As exemplified earlier, in the current master narratives of older adult music education, the overemphasis on the universal value of music in the service of well-being ignores the embodied intersectional identities of individuals, thus limiting the actual potential of identity construction and political agency throughout the life course in and through music education. Indeed, as Gilleard and Higgs (2014) remind us in their work on corporeality, “the agency associated with embodiment, of performing and reforming the embodied identities of disability, gender, race and sexuality still continues in later life” (166). Seemingly helpful narratives of music as making older adults more active, more successful, and healthier may become unhelpful when the individuals are portrayed as neutral, apolitical, and desexualized representatives of merely old age. Therefore, considering how research can help re-story individuals’ narratives not only as representations of their old age but accounts of the rich, versatile, creative, and complex lives can renew research and enrich adult music education programs more broadly.

## Toward Transformative Systems Stories

Stories build and maintain systems by passing on knowledge and influencing each other. Though not representing actual realities but constituting them (Bruner 1991, 5), stories create a sense of meaning and connection between individuals and their natural, material, and social environments. They are crucial in systems thinking that constitutes the exploration of multiple future possibilities for complex systems and examines individuals’ actions in relation to the whole (Luhman and Boje 2001; Stroh 2015; Suarez-Ortega 2012; Preiser et al. 2022; in music education, see West-erlund 2020).

For example, when set aside from the context, the above-mentioned non-participant accounts may reinforce the master narrative of active participation as a measure of good aging—if non-participation is narrowly considered as a risk for exclusion and lack of wellbeing. However, from the systems thinking perspective, they reveal a discrepancy in the social system: the arts and culture institutions appear to serve only those who already have an active lifestyle in retirement. Indeed, according to a systems analysis of the Finnish arts education services, differentiated and specialized professional silos within the system limit the interaction between different sub-systems, which not only narrows the opportunities of the professional sectors to serve society in diverse and efficient ways, but also ignores the varying needs of people, hence creating inequality (Ilmola-Sheppard et al.

2021). Systems thinking is grounded on the notion that the interconnectedness of social systems, such as education, culture, and health sectors, and their different sub-systems often have unexpected and seemingly unpredictable effects (Meadows 1982, Rutherford 2019). Therefore, the social, material, economic, and environmental aspects cannot be separated from the non-participant stories or any other stories from a systems perspective. Systemic connections also take place in less institutional and more informal systems such as a jazz band; even with the best musicians, without connectivity and a shared purpose, the band cannot function. As system thinker David Stroh puts it, “the best way to optimize the system is to improve the relationships among its parts, not to optimize each part separately” (Stroh 2015, 35). Therefore, the power of the systems story approach is to help encapsulate complex problems into recognizable storylines.

In systems thinking vocabulary (e.g., Rutherford 2019), stories may involve themes of amplification (*reinforcing feedback*) or correction (*balancing feedback*). For instance, focusing on culturally active older adults could bring a balancing feedback to the current arts and culture service system, whereas emphasizing the potential of the passive participants through small or nonconventional acts of engagement may lead to reinforcing feedback, uncovering gaps in the current systems and new understandings of the aging population’s needs. These stories develop a richer understanding of social systems by combining and modifying different narratives, illuminating variations, and interacting plots (Stroh 2015). They provide disciplinary perspectives on constructed realities obtained through narrative (Bruner 1991) and reveal how societal, institutional, and cultural practices shape seemingly private life courses. The system consists of the big picture, master narratives, and myths, which often take a long time to dismantle or change; however, systems change always begins at a localized level of the individuals’ lived experiences within their social, material, and embodied world (Siegfried 2021, 37). The systems story approach may help researchers develop disciplinary perspectives on what can be made known through narrative (de Medeiros 2014, 120) and reveal how unexamined contexts for questions, methods, findings, and implications in music education research may contribute to complex problems despite their good intentions (Myers 2008).



## Harnessing Music Education Research to Support Sustainable Aging

Today's most significant challenges are shared globally and across generations, from social inequality to biodiversity loss, and it is a shared responsibility to exercise collective thinking and action to solve them. In this systemic reality, every small story counts; therefore, how communication, storytelling, artistic endeavors, and research processes may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes and presumptions requires careful consideration. Moreover, any stories that disrupt these norms, highlight the power of intergenerational solidarity, celebrate female, male, transgender, and gender non-binary aging bodies and identities, and normalize a sense of agency over the natural co-existence of life and death, can help advance sustainable aging that is not dependent on "hero narratives" of successful old age. Instead, developing an agenda for sustainable aging acknowledges that all stories told and knowledge gained from research are products of general conceptions of aging that need a critical look.

Several perspectives from educational and sociological research can be found to support creating a sustainable aging framework. First, Biggs and Lowenstein (2011) propose Generational Intelligence as a new sustainable approach to age relations. It stems from the need to dismantle simplifying binary opposites of young and old that further generate negative associations based on age or generational division. Hence, they suggest that Generational Intelligence can be advanced by "the fostering of the relative ability to be aware of one's prefiguring internal associations, placing oneself in the shoes of the age-other, recognizing the complementary nature of generational differences in building sustainable intergenerational solutions" (142).

Second, sustainable intergenerational relationships demand restructuring education, workplaces, homes, communities, and governments to distribute power, care, and responsibility across generations (Chatzidakis et al. 2020). In considering aging from a sustainable viewpoint, Chatzidakis and others challenge the deceptive, individualized eternal life mentality that serves neoliberal capitalism and, instead, emphasize seeing our finite and fragile lives as interconnected with others. Third, an intersectional life course perspective focuses on these interconnections of locally and globally linked lives, identities, categories of difference, agency, domination, and resistance. It argues for examining the relations between life events, transitions, trajectories, and systems of power (Holman and Walker 2021).

Most importantly, expanding the *moral economy of the life course* (Gilleard and Higgs 2014) through systems thinking opens up opportunities for world-centeredness (Biesta 2022) as an alternative to self-centeredness. Sustainable aging is about being in dialogue with the world, with past, present, and future generations, and contributing to building social, political, and economic systems that better serve us and the planet. As the artist and activist Alina Siegfried (2021, 197) writes:

The mythic “we” doesn't just refer to those who are living today. It includes all who have come before and those who will come after, many generations from now. It may also include the life on this planet that is not human, from which we have much to learn.

The power of narratives is in personal stories that can better illuminate the transition imagination needed to create a sustainable aging framework rather than in abstract descriptions of aging processes and their societal and economic consequences. Music education research can contribute to the shift in public master narratives by harnessing its activist potential (Hess 2019) to critically consider the prescribed roles and expectations set for aging individuals, help the individuals reclaim their personal stories, and make connections between these stories and the larger systems entities.

Initially, the question in the systems story approach, proposed as one tool for critical research in this article, is not *what stories are told but what is done with the stories*. In other words, engaging with the systems stories approach may help uncover how the smallest narratives can contribute to existing problems such as social inequality or age discrimination. As researchers, the imaginative use of systems stories thus allows us to explore the relationship between socially constructed discourses and epistemic realities (Stroh 2015, 35) beyond personal histories and individual meaning-making. Systems stories as an idea and a tool may invite music educators to link their everyday micro-level work with larger interlocking systems that can disenfranchise and even oppress and reflect on how existing programs and practices might benefit people on the individual level but at the same time aggravate broader social inequalities. This does not necessarily mean eliminating successful older adult music programs, but reminding ourselves that further structural work needs to be done—not just concerning institutional access to music but, for example, how that access might be planned to include more extensive intersecting diversities, rather than considering older adults as one homogenous group (Laes and Schmidt 2021).

There are several ways through which music education can engage with systems change more broadly. As Alina Siegfried (2021) suggests, the impact-focus of systems change is often assumed to operate at the structural level of policies, governance practices, and distribution of resources; however, the essential transformational work happens primarily at the *relational level* of interpersonal communications and connections. Here, the strategic use of storytelling can help to reconfigure the hegemonic understandings and skewed mental models maintained in and through relationships and the power dynamics between them (Siegfried 2021, 30–31). Shifting the focus to the relational level can help transform the systems so that mental models, assumptions, and deeply held beliefs are dismantled, and new shared understandings are constructed. From that vantage point, we can also see the creation of feedback loops leading to increased structural and policy change “as the cultural capacity to envisage and believe in a better future drives the political will to make it so” (Siegfried 2021, 31).

## Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have aimed to invite a critical discussion of the unexamined power of narrative in music education research concerning aging and older adults and to encourage an intersectional take on a musical life course toward new mental models on aging. I have argued that, on the one hand, categorizing some music activities for “older people” cannot increase intergenerational solidarity and support sustainable aging. On the other hand, as music educators of young children, we are investing in the musical agency of future older people. Hence, I propose that our field engages in the transdisciplinary use of systems story tools to harness the transformative potential of music education research—to reshape the socially constructed position of aging people in the politics of music education in and for society. These systems story tools may help us to practice self-awareness (re-think), to identify systems conditions and invent new systems story models (re-story), and to engage with social change through research conducted on the relational level of transformation (reclaim). To construct and tell systems stories and pursue change toward making music education matter in our communities and aging society, music education researchers need to shift from seeing just our part of the system to seeing more of the whole system structure, including why and how it currently operates, as well as what can be done to change it; from hoping that others will make the change to seeing how everyone can be at the forefront of change processes; and

from focusing merely on individual events to understand how they are part of a deeper system structure that gives rise to these events (Stroh 2015, 52). A vision of sustainable aging is based on age relations and embraces care as a social capacity and activity (Chatzidakis et al. 2020).

The sustainable aging paradigm imbues dignity to old lives and considers everyone's intersectional identities and life courses equally relevant. Professionals in music education research and practice can explore ideas that facilitate sustainable aging without subjecting aging per se to medical or therapeutic professionals (Calasanti and King 2020). These ideas may include:

- Plan pedagogical encounters in such a way that they support a dialogic worldview and intergenerational solidarity, even when the group represents the same age cohort. Even small details, stories, and observations are meaningful.
- Actively create opportunities that bring different generations together. Dare to break boundaries and traditional research or teaching models.
- Treat everyone as a potential lifelong learner and musician, regardless of age and ability. Keep in mind that the young of today are the old of tomorrow.
- Be aware of preconceptions and avoid ageist assumptions about appropriate research methods, musical material, or activities.
- Think about combining the heritage of different eras and generations and innovations in musical practices, materials, instruments, use of space, and methods. How can you create a sustainable continuum for musical life courses?
- Practice ecological responsibility in the forms, tools, materials, and methods of pedagogical and research activities to enable new generations to live and age on a healthy planet.

With these ideas and beyond, I invite music education professionals to re-think, re-author, and reclaim narratives of aging that may lead to expanding lifelong and lifewide possibilities of sustainable musical life courses.

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## Notes

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