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## The Benefits of Intergenerational Arts-Based Experiences for Older Adults: A Review of the Literature

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The Benefits of Intergenerational Arts-Based Experiences for Older Adults:

A review of the literature

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Art Therapy

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## BENEFITS OF INTERGENERATIONAL ARTS-BASED EXPERIENCES

### Abstract

Ageism is a prevalent, yet overlooked, force of prejudice in American society, which is precipitated by the widespread institutionalized segregation of individuals among their age groups. Older adults may experience feelings of isolation and worthlessness as they undergo major life changes that disrupt their former sense of self, such as retirement or movement into an assisted living facility. This literature review discusses the significance of applying intergenerational arts-based experiences for older adults with those of a younger generation. While both art therapy and intergenerational programs have shown to benefit older adults, there remains a gap in the literature of applying a combination of the two. The findings of past studies indicate that using art intergenerationally helps address ageism in society by exposing those of a younger generation to those in an older generation, and thereby addressing preconceived stereotypes. Intergenerational programs provide an opportunity for older adults to connect to their community and lift them out of isolation. Such programs also aid several areas of mental health for older adults, such as fostering their sense of identity, providing alternate and supplementary forms of communication, building new skills to serve life-long learning, and alleviating symptoms of depression.

*Keywords:* ageism, arts-based, art therapy, intergenerational, older adults

## BENEFITS OF INTERGENERATIONAL ARTS-BASED EXPERIENCES

The Benefits of Intergenerational Arts-Based Experiences for Older Adults:

A review of the literature

### **Introduction**

“What should young people do with their lives today? Many things, obviously. But the most daring thing is to create stable communities in which the terrible disease of loneliness can be cured.”

– Kurt Vonnegut, 1981

There is an antiquated practice in the United States of segregating groups of people by generation. This segregation can cause a sense of “otherness” that only serves to promote ageist thinking (Whiteland, 2013). The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the potential beneficial outcomes for older adults when joining with those of a younger generation in an arts-based experience. The term arts-based here refers to an experience in which fine arts, craft, and graphic arts media are used to engage individuals. Intergenerational engagement is defined as “the interaction and engagement of individuals of different age categories” (Davis, as cited in Whiteland, 2013, p. 22). While there is evidence backing both the benefit of utilizing art with older adults and the benefit of intergenerational shared experiences, there is a slight gap in the literature of what specifically results from combining the two concepts. In identifying this gap, the question arises: Is there potentially more benefit for older adults in making art with members of a different generation than making art alone? In reviewing the literature, I found six key issues facing elders: Ageism, Identity, Strength-based Communication, Community, Skill Building, and Depression. Each of these sections will be further discussed with regard to how arts-based intergenerational engagement addresses these issues.

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In my youth I spent much of my time with my grandparents honing skills that continue to define my identity today. The connection we shared was pivotal in forming my passion and sense of self. With them, I learned the basics of drawing which sparked my love of fine art and ultimately led to my desire to pursue Art Therapy as a profession. As an art therapist-in-training, I have examined the literature through an art therapy lens, and with acknowledgement of my own biases, informed by my experience and close relationship to my grandparents. While subjectively, the importance of this work is clear, I hope to explicitly illuminate that importance through an examination of the literature.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Ageism**

Ageism is a form of prejudice against a person or group of people based on their age. Most commonly, this prejudice pertains to a negative view of older adults. Older adults are discriminatorily viewed as frail, ornery, and in a state of cognitive decline (Duffy, 2017; Lagacé, Tanguay, Lavallée, Laplante, & Robichaud, 2012). A common materialization of this prejudice that directly impacts older adults is that of ageist language. In many cases of ageist language, older adults are treated in a controlling or infantilizing manner. Infantilization occurs when individuals use “baby talk” or speak in a higher tone to talk down to an older adult. In a Canadian study surveying 33 older adults on their perception of potentially ageist caregiver behavior, 70% provided specific examples of care-givers using controlling language, and 64% noted a strong presence of infantilization (Lagacé, Tanguay, Lavallée, Laplante, & Robichaud, 2012). Ageism has also been one of the least addressed forms of prejudice and as such requires social action (Lagacé, Tanguay, Lavallée, Laplante, & Robichaud, 2012).

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The social action approach to ageism could involve arts-based engagement with intergenerationally constructed groups of people. Studies have explored the possible effects on ageist perspectives when members of different generations work together in arts-based practices (DeVore, Winchell, & Rowe, 2016; Heydon, 2005; Larson, 2006; Moody & Phinney, 2012; Partridge, 2019; Whiteland, 2013; Whiteland, 2016). Art has long been a form of enacting social change, both in the context of raising awareness and in social activism (Dittmar & Entin, 2014). This section will explore how intergenerationally engaged art acts as social change activism, destigmatizes the sense of “otherness”, and fosters empathy.

**Social change activism.** Collaboration is an intrinsic aspect of social change activism, especially in the arts (Robson, Gutman, Marchbank, & Blair, 2018). Therefore, intergenerational collaboration could likely serve to further strengthen the cause of addressing ageism. Some studies have aimed to research the benefit of children interacting with older adults in hopes of finding whether the experience has a positive effect on their view of older adults (DeVore, Winchell, & Rowe, 2016; Heydon, 2005; Larson, 2006; Moody & Phinney, 2012; Whiteland, 2013; Whiteland, 2016). Larson (2006), for example, found that when older and younger generations are given the chance to share their perspectives with one another, they can move past preconceived stereotypes. Intergenerational engagement offers an opportunity for individuals of different age groups to confront previously held stereotypes through witnessing the person, not their age.

In another example, Heydon (2005) published a study designed to de-pathologize aging through art. Her study offered an intergenerational art class at a long-term care facility in Washington with older adults, children, and adults with disabilities. While children, older adults, and disabled individuals are often viewed in terms of what they cannot do, this program held an

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art show every year to highlight the capability, creativity, and worth of these marginalized groups of people (Heydon, 2005). Art is a valuable tool in addressing ageist stereotypes as it allows individuals of any age to demonstrate their strengths and abilities.

**De-stigmatizing “otherness”.** An underlying question arises as we research this topic: why are children and older adults separated in the first place? We have day care centers, adult day health centers, assisted living facilities, etc. These age-segregated facilities only serve to promote ageism (Whiteland, 2013). This creates thoughts of “otherness” by insinuating that a specific group of people is no longer valuable to the whole of society. Older adults are estranged from society because they can no longer contribute to the growth of the economy; similarly, children are at an age where they are not yet contributing economically, like persons with disabilities and in old age, “...it renders their contributions to society invisible and can minimize their social power by limiting their access to all forms of capital” (Heydon, 2005, p. 249). This separation also limits one’s intellectual and emotional growth within the frame of one group of people.

A study on intergenerational (IG) programming in the United States found children became more comfortable interacting with older adults after participating in arts-based IG activities, even for as brief a time as one summer. “Children were more comfortable approaching older adults. This included approaching older persons in community settings as well as outside the shared site where the IG activities took place” (DeVore, Winchell, & Rowe, 2016, p. 218). The study challenged the perspectives the children held of the older adults involved. In doing so, the study then witnessed a ripple effect in how the children positively shifted their view of the population of older adults as a whole. Fostering interactions between different groups of people

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provides an opportunity to confront the concept of the “other” and instead allows individuals to be viewed as the person within, not solely the age group they belong to.

A study utilizing puppetry and storytelling in an intergenerational art class found similar results. University student facilitators of the group noted the children becoming more at ease around the older adults as observed through their ability to joke more after spending multiple days with the older generation (Whiteland, 2016). However, when surveyed on their view of older adults after the art class reached completion, the children’s responses varied little from their original responses in the pre- art class survey. Most children in the group already had a positive view of older adults. Many of these children did report having a positive relationship with their grandparents, many of whom lived nearby, which could contribute to the positive outlook (Whiteland, 2016).

**Foster empathy.** Fostering empathy among different generations may allow them to better understand and relate to other groups. In one arts-based community project centered around positivity over age, participants were asked a short series of questions about how they would describe their age and how they feel other generations may describe their age. In the surveys, both older adults and teenagers found they held shared feelings of dismissal or being misunderstood by others (Partridge, 2019). The community art project fostered a connection and opportunity for the older adults and teenagers to see their similarities rather than solely their differences (Partridge, 2019).

Another study found a growth in empathy towards the other age groups after participating in an intergenerational art project (Whiteland, 2013). The older adults and young children, while still separated, were encouraged to work on a joint collage book with various art mediums by passing the book back and forth between the adult day center and preschool. Despite never



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meeting, both groups wanted to send messages to the other through the book. After seeing pictures of the adult day center, the children felt they lacked decorations at their facility and consequently asked if they could send some to their site (Whiteland, 2013). The children in this study demonstrated their growth in empathy by caring about and seeking to positively affect the well-being of the elders they had gotten to know through art-making.

### **Identity**

Identity is a pertinent concept for older adults. Dementia affects one's memory and eventually their ability to recognize not only other people, but themselves. It affects roughly 5.8 million Americans, 5.6 million of which are older adults (Gaugler, James, Johnson, Marin, & Weuve, 2019). This causes a negative outlook in our society of older adults having narrowing identities. Even without dementia, identity begins to change and "narrow" in older adulthood as they undergo pivotal life changes. From changes like retirement, movement to an assisted living, or decreased hobbies from loss of certain skills, older adults face many changes in aspects of their life that once facilitated a sense of self. Working intergenerationally may allow older adults to engage with others such as children who tend to experiment with more complex identity options that challenge the narrowing of identities (Heydon, 2012).

Intergenerational arts-based engagement allows older adults to explore new identities with a group of people who gravitate towards being more fluid and open to experimentation. One study explored the artistic content of the participants as a means to understand their identity options and observed, "The notion that children may be more open to communicative possibilities than adults was reinforced as the children's texts were more visually complex than the adult's. Moreover, the children experimented far more with the media" (Heydon, 2012, p. 67). The two most crucial identity options that have been observed through intergenerational

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arts-based experiences are forming an identity within the context of a relationship and forming an artist identity.

**Identity within the context of a relationship.** When working intergenerationally, different roles can be explored, which can then further expand ideas about identity. In the context of a relationship, it allows the roles of student and teacher to be explored. For example, in a study using iPads to create artistic projects and portfolios, the children were able to assist older adults with the technology which allowed the older adults to explore the identity of being a student, “The children, despite seeming to have no more experience with the iPads than the elders, did catch on more quickly. They thus sometimes schooled the adults, which provided opportunities for new identity options and relationship-building” (Heydon, McKee, & Daly, 2017, p. 367).

Identity can also develop and change in intergenerational familial relationships. Older adults can begin to feel separated from their family, and in some cases, separate themselves for fear of being burdensome. In cases of individuals with memory loss, it can be hard for family members to accept that the person they know and love is changing and may not remember them anymore. However, the relationship need not end, only adapt. In a study exploring the metaphor of embroidery in weaving together a person’s identity, a daughter found artistic experiences as a new way to relate to her mother diagnosed with Alzheimer’s:

Evidentemente, cuidar ha supuesto para mí un cambio de vida radical que hice no sin esfuerzo y crisis, pero con la perspectiva de que la mejor manera de afrontar la enfermedad no era recuperar el pasado, sino vivir el día a día, desde la alegría del hacer juntas. [Obviously, caring has meant for me a radical life change that I made not without effort and crisis, but with the perspective that the best way to deal with the disease was

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not to recover the past, but to live day to day, from the joy of do together.] (Martínez-Vérez, Abad-Molina, & Hernández-Pinzón, 2017, p. 234).

Alzheimer's causes a drastic change to both the identity of the individual diagnosed and to their relationship with family members. In this example, the daughter was able to relate to and explore with her mother diagnosed with Alzheimer's through joint art-making.

**Artist identity.** Part of fostering one's identity can include claiming an artist identity. An artist identity can be a new way for an individual to understand themselves as they explore a new media. This form of identity can be fostered through an intergenerational arts-based intervention such as a studio art group between older and younger generations. A studio setting provides a community in which people of different skill sets can explore art together (Partridge, 2019). This section will discuss the fostering of an artist identity through studio art therapy, highlighting artistic achievement, and facilitator reinforcement.

**Studio art therapy.** Forming an artist identity is a critical frame of using studio art therapy with older adults. Individuals partaking in studio groups can gain confidence and self-advocacy as well through exploring their artist identity. One studio group observed a woman being able to claim that identity for herself, "Oh I'm not an artist – I consider myself a painter who uses watercolors" (Partridge, 2019, p. 51). A common intervention when working with older adults with dementia involves reminding the person who they are, but it is more personal and potentially powerful when a person can claim the identity for themselves through an artistic association. Through an intergenerational standpoint, working alongside members of a different generation in a studio group has the ability to introduce individuals to different creative processes they may aspire to engage in.

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***Highlighting artistic achievement.*** Witnessing their artwork is a visual and representational way of fostering an artist identity, which is why many intergenerational studies included an art show at the end of their program. One study also used portfolios as a way of accomplishing this through use of iPads for each of the participants artwork. These digital portfolios fostered opportunities for participants to identify themselves and their work. “The integration of the digital media into the class offered participants new tools for meaning making and promoted intergenerational relationship-building by mediating interactions; it also expanded identity options by generating, consolidating and highlighting achievements” (Heydon, McKee, & Daly, 2017, p. 366). In an intergenerational setting, children and older adults alike are given the opportunity to explore being an artist and can be encouraged to continue the exploration through the support of those around them.

***Facilitator reinforcement.*** In an art therapy lens, the facilitator of such a program must reinforce the identity for the individual artists as well through encouraging statements, “Once the product is completed the art therapist can acknowledge, ‘You did this’ or ‘This is a part of you,’ which may give elders a stronger sense of self. The creative process of trusting oneself and one’s feelings is what is important to achieve” (Kerr, 1999, p. 40). Trusting that one’s feeling are real and valid is a crucial aspect of working with older adults, particularly with those facing dementia as they struggle to hold onto their reality. As their grasp on their identity seems to falter, art can serve as tangible evidence of who they are and what they are capable of.

### **Strength-based Communication**

As stated before, a key issue facing older adults is memory loss and other harrowing symptoms of dementia. Difficulty or loss of communication is another symptom of dementia. As cognitive functioning begins to decline, it is important to find other ways of engaging

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individuals. “One way of conceptualizing communication with those who have dementia, is the ability of communication to stimulate the emotional brain” (Horwitz & Huss, 2016, p. 299).

Delusions are an aspect faced by those diagnosed with dementia as they undergo cognitive decline. While these delusions that persons with dementia describe may seem incredulous, their emotions in regard to them are very real. Arts-based experiences are a way of reaching and stimulating this emotional brain. This is achieved through active meaning-making through working symbolically, rather than only relying primarily on cognitive processing, through art. Fostering strength-based communication in the face of cognitive loss can flourish in an intergenerational arts-based experience through addressing nonverbal communication, utilizing technology in communication, and exploring symbolic forms of communication.

**Nonverbal communication.** Partridge, an art therapist, reported on how working in an art studio unveils “uncovered talents and histories among the elders who were no longer able to speak their history aloud” (Partridge, 2019, p. 58). She specifically noted the story of one nonverbal woman who when given a spool of yarn began weaving with a renewed energy, exhibited by her shift in posture. Later, Partridge discovered from family members that the woman was an avid weaver who had enjoyed working with fiber art before her decline with dementia. Despite not being able to talk, the woman was able to communicate her penchant for weaving through working artistically.

**Technology.** Communicating non-verbally can be a difficult bridge for facilitators to cross when working with older adults affected by dementia. A study in Sweden attempted to foster engagement between young adults and older adults with dementia by using the internet to explore various art media that may access fond memories of the older adults. The young adults held the role of Playmakers (PM) and noticed a felt sense of joy when being able to reach the

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individuals without verbal communication. “The focus on nonverbal communication also seems to activate synchrony – or moments described by the PM where they feel they are getting through and creating a joint interactive space that was observed in their synchronized body movements” (Horwitz & Huss, 2016, p. 306). This sense of “synchrony” was achieved through the exploration of art between two people sharing an experience.

Using technology in art to foster communication has also been seen to be beneficial in intergenerational programs. In one study using iPads the facilitators noted the amount of laughter between the older adults and young children as they experimented with animated images. In this specific program the older adults and young children worked in pairs. As they worked more throughout the course of the program one child animated his image to tell his older adult companion that he loved him (Heydon, McKee, & Daly, 2017). This perhaps offered a sense of distancing in being able to communicate. Communicating something as emotionally heavy as feelings of love can be difficult to achieve verbally. This displays how we can learn to communicate through technology while fostering intimate relationships.

**Symbolic communication.** Communicating intergenerationally is specifically potent between younger children and older adults (Heydon, McKee, & Daly, 2017). Young children often experiment with varying modes of communication as they grow and learn before depending on a more formal vocal language. They can use this wide range of communication options to interact with older adults who may have begun to face certain language deficits. “The need to communicate through modes other than or in addition to language can re-emerge in late life when older adults may find language use grow more difficult, owing to cognitive or physical changes” (Heydon, McKee, & Daly, 2017, p. 353). Art making is a symbolic way of communicating outside of the use of verbal language. When art is used in a collaborative context

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the gates of communication open further. “Collaborative forms of narrative expression open communication, help build respect and develop understanding and appreciation between the generations” (Lawton, as cited in Whiteland, 2016, p. 17).

### **Community**

A major change older adults often undergo is a shift in their community. “Older adults in congregate living situations are often grouped by their level of care need or diagnoses, not necessarily by their interests or passions. Interactions as creative individuals help them to learn about and connect to each other” (Partridge, 2019, p. 57). Those who no longer work or live independently may be feeling a loss of connection from their former community settings. This relates to the concept of social inclusion which describes “individuals and groups who are involved in society in a meaningful way” (Moody & Phinney, 2012, p. 56). Considering the segregation from society that occurs for older adults between places such as assisted living centers and nursing homes, older adults are rarely afforded the opportunity to experience social inclusion.

Intergenerational art programs can be a way to foster social inclusion. Art programs not only provide a new community for older adults to participate in, but provide opportunity for meaningful community building. Joining younger generations with older generations allows space for interaction with a group of people they may not have otherwise interacted with (Alexenberg & Benjamin 2004; Moody & Phinney, 2012; Robson, Gutman, Marchbank, & Blair, 2018). Intergenerational art-making can be both an interactive and meaningful community as it allows individuals to address shared community issues, form new connections in a time when opportunity for social support may be low, and connect individuals through both shared and differing cultures.

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**Addressing shared community issues.** Art programs have been considered a powerful way of connecting individuals to their community (Partridge, 2019). As Moody and Phinney (2012) observed, one way in which they provide a unique connection is through using art to explore a shared community issue:

CEA (Community-engaged art) programs provide an environment where professional artists collaborate with participants to create an aesthetic product or performance which addresses a relevant community issue. The intent is that a performance or work of art is ultimately presented in a public venue to further engage with, and be appreciated by, the wider community.” (p. 56)

When an older adult might be feeling potentially disconnected from their society, art can foster a sense of purpose within the community to allow elders to have voice. An example of this occurred in a study connecting LGBT older adults with LGBT youths to participate in a digital and print media art project aiming to educate their community on elder abuse in the LGBT community. Youth and elders co-constructed the themes for the various videos and educational posters, giving them the power and agency to make a difference in their community (Robson, Gutman, Marchbank, & Blair, 2018).

**New Connections.** In the aforementioned study surrounding elder abuse in the LGBT community, researchers observed individual older adults and younger adults developing deeper connections with one another. The different age groups may not have ever met without the study. “The two would have been unlikely to meet or spend time together under normal circumstances, but developed a close working relationship during this project” (Robson, Gutman, Marchbank, & Blair, 2018, p. 62). The two groups were able to challenge one another’s beliefs on topics such as



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gender and sexuality which may not have happened if they weren't exposed to groups with potentially differing opinions and constructs of understanding.

The Arts, Health and Seniors (AHS) program in Vancouver provided intergenerational connections with third grade students from a public elementary school across the street from the senior center. Despite being so close, they had not previously interacted before participating in the program (Moody & Phinney, 2012). When the program was through, the seniors were surveyed over what parts of the program they enjoyed, and the group immediately stated they wanted the elementary students to return (Moody & Phinney, 2012). This perhaps demonstrates the need for intergenerational programs to connect older adults with other community groups.

**Cultural Connections.** Culture plays an important role in individual and community experience. Arts have the ability to promote cultural solidarity (Horwitz & Huss, 2016) (Alexenberg & Benjamin, 2004). Sharing in one's own culture is a vital part of social identity, but equally important is the joy of learning and interacting with individuals from a different culture. In a public art project in Miami, 20 women from three different elder services programs joined together with young students to create a three-dimensional collage depicting the different ethnic communities. African-American elders from the Greater Bethel AME Church, Hispanic elders from Southwest Social Services Program, and Jewish elders from the Miami Jewish Home for the Aged all worked together and remained engaged in conversation during the art-making process, which was a social opportunity not usually afforded (Alexenberg & Benjamin 2004).

### **Skill Building**

Another example of an ageist concept in present society is the harmful myth that older adults can no longer learn new things. Skill building addresses this concept in the framework of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning describes learning not solely for educational purposes, but

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with a “personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective” (Weinstein, 2004, p. 3). This lifelong learning framework can be applied to places like assisted livings and adult day centers as ways to keep older adult individuals cognitively stimulated.

Artistic skills building is an example of what can be offered lifelong. While cognitive-based skills can be difficult as older adults face cognitive loss through diseases like dementia, “art therapy also helps exercise those areas of the brain that are still functioning well and increases quality of life by providing opportunities for sensory stimulation and self-expression” (Stewart, 2004, p. 150). Applying this lens through an intergenerational arts-based experience also allows older adult individuals to learn new skills alongside a generation, such as children, that is also in the process of developing skills. Providing older adults with an opportunity to foster skills allows new space for expression, learning new things, working collaboratively, and fostering pride.

**New space for expression.** Artistic skills are a worthwhile choice for older adults because many older adults in today’s society have not explored art since childhood. The Baby Boomer generation did not put as strong an importance on the arts as they did on career and family building. As such, art can offer a new tool for them to learn. “Although nearly all of the elders had no prior experience in art production or working with clay, their technical skills and aesthetic judgment developed during their year of participation” (Alexenberg & Benjamin, 2004, p. 15). Another study utilized modern technologies along with arts programming and found positive gains regarding using new found skills in pragmatic ways. The participants, “learned skills that might serve them in future employment or projects, whether creative, activist, or both” (Robson, Gutman, Marchbank, & Blair, 2018, p. 60). Framing art in a pragmatic way, such as

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supporting employment skills building, could be a beneficial way of reaching the Baby Boomer generation as well.

**Learning new things.** When including modern technologies in the arts process that older adults may not have had prior experience with, you are providing an opportunity for the younger generation to teach and the older generation to learn through a collaborative process. This process of educational collaboration allows individuals to experience new identity roles and relationships (Heydon, McKee, & Daly, 2017). Using technologies can also help older adults not feel “lost” in an increasingly technological world. “The elders—most of who came of age before computers—have sometimes felt like outsiders in the digital world. They thus welcomed this opportunity to learn and apply new skills in a supportive environment” (Robson, Gutman, Marchbank, & Blair, 2018, p. 48). Leaving older adults out of the rise of technology only further distances them from the world around them and encourages the ageist concept of older adults no longer providing valuable contribution to the community (Heydon, 2005).

**Fostering pride.** Learning new skills is also helpful in fostering pride. Artistic creations provide a visual, tangible representation of an individual’s skill. Pride in the product correlates with pride in themselves. In the study using iPads as art portfolios, one older adult participant was able to comment on how these artistic skill sets may have affected the younger generation. In response to how the arts-based programming positively affected the child participants the participant shared, “I think it gives them...a sense of... what they’re doing is worthwhile...and is recognized...and when they see what they do, and they see what the others do, sometimes it...encourages them to get a little bit better” (Heydon, McKee, & Daly, 2017, p. 368). This participant’s insight into the growth and pride felt by the children provides a relational understanding of his own positive experience of building artistic skills.

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### **Depression**

Depression is one of the most commonly diagnosed mental illnesses in the country and is more prevalent still among older adults affecting about 7% of the older adult population (Johannsen, 2019). Despite the figures, proper care is still not commonplace for older adults facing symptoms of depression. Depression may be stronger still amongst this group of people because of the amount of loss and isolation they face from both life changes and society's negative outlook on aging.

Given the universality of some of the symptoms, such as isolation, loneliness, and worthlessness, research suggests that both older and younger generations could benefit from collaborative art making. "Through artwork, older adults are able to reflect on achievements and share those accomplishments with other generations or peers in a vitally engaged manner" (Johannsen, 2019, p. 49). According to Johannsen (2019) when studying the relationship between art activities and depression, there was a negative correlation witnessed between the length of art making and the reported symptoms of depression. This indicated that perhaps the longer an individual engages in art making, the greater a decrease in depression symptoms becomes (Johannsen, 2019). Intergenerational arts-based experiences can aide with symptoms of depression by decreasing isolation, forming meaningful relationships, and increasing feelings of self-esteem and self-worth.

**Isolation.** Isolation is one of the more pressing symptoms of depression facing older adults. As they face the death of friends, potential movement into an assisted living facility, and their own retirement, older adults deal with many losses to their social structure. As mentioned before, older adults are often segregated into communities meant for their age group alone. One study found increasing interactions with younger children for such isolated older adults to be a

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critical intervention, “Having increased opportunities for regular interactions with young children is especially critical for older adults...The sense of worthlessness and isolation that some older adults experience can be offset by participation in organized IG activities” (DeVore, Winchell, & Rowe, 2016, p. 217).

After observing the relationship of weaving with forming identities in older adults, Martínez-Vérez, Abad-Molina, & Hernández-Pinzón, 2017 stated:

Las artes poseen un papel importante en la salud de las personas, entendida ésta, no solo como ausencia de enfermedad, sino como bienestar físico, psicológico y social. Y a través de su mediación, se expresan los valores de las artes que promueven la calidad de vida y la dimensión relacional del hecho artístico [The arts have an important role in people's health, understood not only as absence of disease, but as physical, psychological and social well-being. And through their mediation, the values of the arts that promote the quality of life and the relational dimension of the artistic act are expressed.] (p. 227)

The relational dimension in the case of intergenerational arts-based experiences refers to the bond being formed between the older and younger generation as they engage in the meaningful activity of art making.

**Meaningful relationships.** In a study using the internet to explore various art media with older adults with dementia, the young adults gave older adults access to the arts that allowed them to explore memories. This was achieved by using the internet to find beloved music, movies, or fine art from the older individual’s past interests. “On a deeper level, it was described as regulating negative emotions, developing empathy and learning to interact with the self and others on a more authentic emotional level” (Horwitz & Huss, 2016, p. 307). The young adults in

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this study were not always able to communicate verbally with the older adults and therefore had to develop empathy to understand the other person for an authentic connection.

Perceived positive relationships with care-givers are strongly correlated with how comfortable older individuals feel with integrating themselves in oftentimes necessary services (Duffy, 2017). These services could include mental health, physical health, or services offering various forms of engagement. One Canadian study interviewed older adults on their perceptions of their care-givers in search of ageist behaviors and found that some older adult participants also wanted highlighted their special bond formed with certain caregivers (Lagacé, Tanguay, Lavallée, Laplante, & Robichaud, 2012). While a meaningful relationship had not always formed with a caregiver, it suggests the importance of developing social connection for older adults on their overall well-being.

**Increasing feelings of self-esteem and self-worth.** Self-esteem is a pertinent topic for individuals across the lifespan. However, it becomes substantially important in older adulthood as we consider the changes older adults face regarding their identity and their environment.

According to Kerr, (1999):

The changes endemic to the unsuccessful experience of aging-such as loss of self-esteem, isolation, loneliness, and loss of work-result in endogenous and exogenous depressive disorders in older populations. Self-esteem can be regarded as a personally generated evaluation of worthiness, and for the elderly depression can lead to decreased self-esteem. (p. 38)

Art can be a way to foster feelings of self-esteem and self-worth by providing older adults with a meaningful experience. One way this is commonly achieved is through participation in an art show after the completion of a program. Framing an individual's work affirms that what they

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made was worthwhile and important. Specifically, when creating art in an intergenerational program, older adults are able to challenge their own perceptions of aging as well as those of children. This concept has also been noted to provide seniors with a sense of self-worth as they can contribute to future societal perception of their age group.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this capstone thesis is to review the existing literature on intergenerational arts-based experiences. Specifically, this capstone highlights the beneficial outcomes of the studies and examines any potential gaps in the research. In approaching this research, I used search terms such as “intergenerational art”, “intergenerational art programs”, “art therapy with older adults”, and “multigenerational art”. When art therapy-specific interventions were not coming up among intergenerational studies, broadening my search to arts-based experiences provided a sufficient number of studies for which I could provide the lens of art therapy. As an art therapy graduate student, I study the benefit of making art in a therapeutic context. The literature yielded a range of results regarding what benefits exist for older adults when creating art in an intergenerational setting. Of the results discussed in the literature, I highlighted six strong themes that tended to overlap in multiple studies: addressing ageism, fostering identity, strength-based communication, connection to community, skill-building, and decrease in symptoms of depression.

The literature reviewed in this capstone provided a relatively recent lens on intergenerational arts-based experiences dating from 2004 to 2019. Many of the findings in the literature complemented my tacit knowledge from experiences with older adults, both in my family and at my internship site. As an art therapy intern at Goddard House Assisted Living, I gained experience working with older adults both on the traditional unit and on memory care. I

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witnessed first-hand how impactful pride in the art product was for individuals. Per my observations of older adults, the arts fostered self-esteem, especially as individuals faced identity losses due to dementia. Older adult involvement in intergenerational arts-based experiences also appeared to provide them with purpose and meaning.

### **Gaps and limitations**

The gaps in the topic of intergenerational arts-based experiences revealed an area of weakness to the literature review. In the initial search, I struggled to find articles directly relating to my topic and as stated before, had to provide a lens of art therapy when intergenerational studies specific to art therapy were not found. Another gap identified in this review was in arts-based engagement specifically for older adults in intergenerational programming. Without studies to review, it became difficult to distinguish between arts-based experiences for older adults and intergenerational arts-based experiences. One study (Johannsen, 2019) reported on the effects of art activities with older adults facing depression and found little difference in symptom reduction in comparison between adult only art classes and intergenerational art classes. However, this study did not have control groups of individuals participating only in the adult class and only in the intergenerational class. The overlap of participants in the study made it difficult to determine what class had a greater effect on the symptom reduction. Consequently, more studies could be done with controlled groups to further develop research regarding what makes intergenerational art therapy potentially more effective than art therapy with older adults alone.

### **Recommendations**

In looking to future research, I think the most beneficial contribution would be to begin forming more intergenerational programs at sites for individuals of all ages. Programs that



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integrate facilities like adult day centers with child daycare centers could provide a novel technique to interrupt systemic institutionalized age segregation, thereby reducing ageism in society. Further research could also be given to the topic of technology in the context of intergenerational arts-based experiences. Many of the studies reviewed have significant technological aspects, which could be further explored (Heydon, McKee, & Daly, 2017; Horwitz, & Huss, 2016; Robson, Gutman, Marchbank, & Blair, 2018). Technology provides another form of access to artistic experience, communication, and skill building and therefore could be a rich topic of research on its own.

The beneficial outcomes for older adults participating in intergenerational arts-based experiences are significant. This literature review discussed the benefits of intergenerational arts-based experiences as relevant in the field of art therapy. It sought to address ageist societal perspectives that are further promoted by systemic segregation of older adults and also provide recommendations for future research on the topic. Ageism, identity, communication, community, skill building, and depression are important issues to continue considering with older adults. Intergenerational arts-based experiences may be a one way to address these concerns. This capstone may provide a jumping-off point for future art therapists to create communities in which intergenerational artistic interventions can address the needs of older adults.

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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

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Expressive Therapies Division  
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Art Therapy, MA**

**Student's Name:** Lauren Adams

**Type of Project:** Thesis

**Title:** The Benefits of Intergenerational Arts-Based Experiences for Older Adults:

A review of the literature

**Date of Graduation:** May 5, 2020

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor:** Michelle Napoli