

Youth and Peer Relationships in Vernacular Music and Dance Communities

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A popular joke among Appalachian folk musicians is to welcome newcomers to the tradition by assuring them that their new musical interest will make them “tens of dollars!” This witticism appears to draw its humor from a purely financial perspective, but at a deeper level the joke dismisses an overweening focus on a small financial outcome at the expense of a much larger social reward. Indeed, many participants in various forms of vernacular music and dance stay involved with their chosen art form not for financial purposes, but because they enjoy the community of artists and have developed friendships among peers within this setting. But do young musicians and dancers easily find this sense of community in the world of vernacular performing arts?

In the summer of 2015, before I left the United States to study vernacular arts in Ireland, I was helping two young friends living in a small rural community in Michigan find email pen pals who shared their interest in folk fiddling and singing. They had no friends with similar interests in their area, so I offered to contact some of my music teacher friends in other locations. When I contacted the facilitators of several youth vernacular music programs, I heard over and over again that these programs were struggling to attract and retain members and that it would be challenging to find young people who would be interested in connecting with the two musicians. I became curious about why many young people seemed to have difficulty engaging with peers in adjacent arts communities, when adults in the same environment appeared to be more successful. In response to this question, as part of my study program I developed a survey to ask young people about their experiences in the vernacular arts (in this case, in the Irish traditions) and about the factors that facilitated or impeded their participation in music and dancing activities. I posted the survey link on Facebook and Tumblr.

In this survey, sixty percent of participants indicated that hypothetically, they would feel more motivated to participate in traditional arts programs if those programs facilitated friendships with other musicians and dancers.¹ The same percentage expressed a desire to have more similar- or same-aged peers in their music and dance classes. Fifty-seven percent of participants cited, as factors motivating continued participation, the opportunity to spend time

with friends; sixty-four percent expressed the desire to be part of a larger community of musicians and dancers.

These responses indicate not only that peer relationships form a significant part of the appeal of vernacular music and dance to young learners, but also that a majority of all survey respondents would like to experience more connection to similar-aged peers. In short: young musicians and dancers wish to develop friendships with other artists within their age groups but they are struggling to reach this goal. Based on the stories of low engagement and retention of young students that I heard while looking for pen pals, a reasonable hypothesis suggests that a scarcity of youth involved in traditional arts hinders young musicians and dancers from developing friendships with similar-aged peers in their arts community.

The survey data indicates several possible reasons for this struggle: seventy-one percent of survey respondents reported that public or private schools or university coursework played a major role in their educational identities, so it is possible that such learners have become accustomed to highly structured environment primarily comprised of similar-aged peers. They may feel a sense of discomfort in a music or dance environment where, despite a strong emphasis on socialization, there is comparatively connection with their usual peer group. Such learners may significantly benefit from the guidance of a teacher or program facilitator who can help them to develop artistic friendships in a new and unfamiliar environment.

Twenty-one percent of respondents indicated that they were homeschooled, a percentage seven times higher than the overall three percent of students who are homeschooled in the United States. Ninety-one percent of homeschoolers cited concerns about traditional school environments as a reason for choosing homeschooling.² Because homeschooled musicians and dancers do not have the same range of experience of learning in a structured school environment, they may experience frustration when trying to make new friends in a arts-community setting.³ Therefore, homeschooled musicians and dancers can also benefit from the aid of a teacher or facilitator who is sensitive to peer-group dynamics, as students work to develop friendships in a vernacular arts community.

The development of positive peer relationships can also help young musicians and dancers to stay engaged with the vernacular arts and their local community. Among elementary school students, the formation of friendships with school classmates has been found to lead to an increased sense of belonging, which in turn increases positive attitudes towards school, enhances

motivation to participate in academic activities, and raises levels of scholastic achievement.⁴

Although a vernacular music community or learning environment differs in key ways from an elementary school classroom, the same effects of healthy relationships with peers and the consequent sense of belonging can lead to greater participation and achievement for young musicians and dancers.

Peer friendships within a vernacular music and dance community can also help youth to avoid negative perceptions of traditional arts from the wider peer-group. These perceptions can range from a dismissal of music as a socially undesirable activity, to gender or genre prejudices which, for example, label playing Irish music as “feminine,” while declaring the creation of rap music to be “masculine.” However, data suggests that when young musicians develop friendships with peers who share their musical interests, they are significantly less affected by these stereotypes.⁵ Research also points to increased levels of achievement when young people in a group environment share not only interests, but also learning and social goals.⁶ In the context of youth vernacular music environments, therefore, it appears that two salient social goals are the formation of artistic friendships and the dismantling of stereotypes about young musicians. A potential teaching strategy derived from this data could be to regard social skills in addition to technical skills as objectives for students to meet, on their way to becoming full participants in their music and dance communities. Teachers, and the collaborative music-making process itself, can also encourage students to work together with their peers to critically examine expectations and presumptions about vernacular performing arts.⁷

This data highlights the need for teachers and program leaders in vernacular music and dance programs to monitor and facilitate healthy peer interactions among the youth in their programs. Cooperative learning structures and problem-solving team-based learning is tailor-made for participatory music making and can help to promote positive peer interaction. In cooperative settings, learners help one another and share learning resources, while at the same time developing an atmosphere of trust. If a music teacher or program facilitator senses that young learners are excluding classmates or forming cliques, applying a cooperative model through group musical projects or team building musical activities could help to create a more positive learning environment.

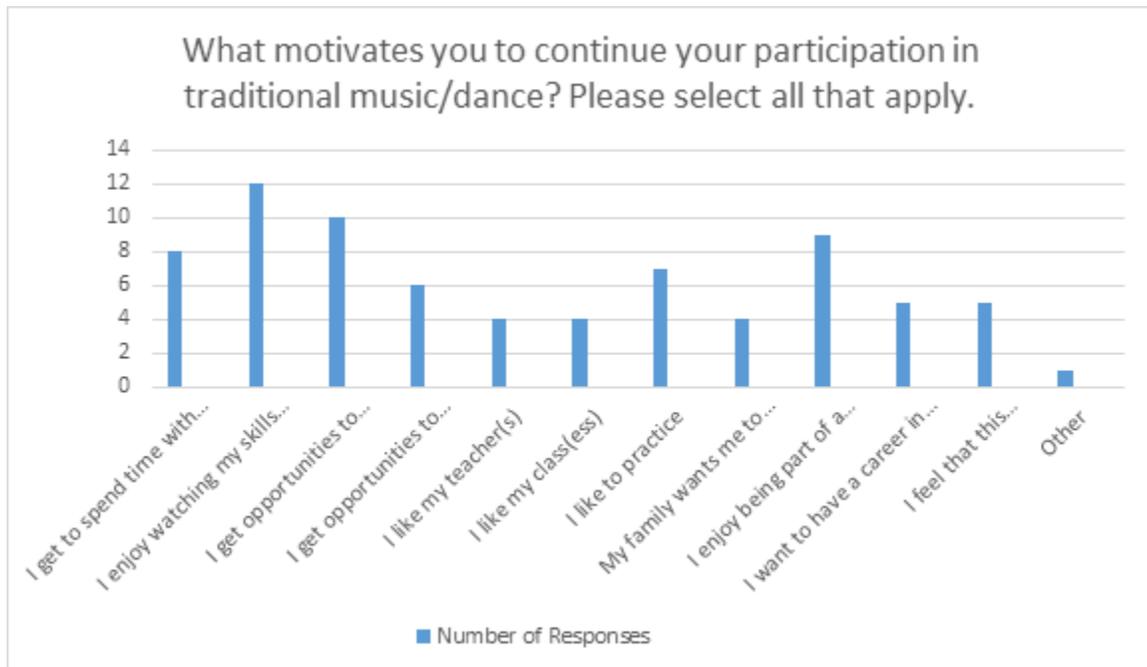
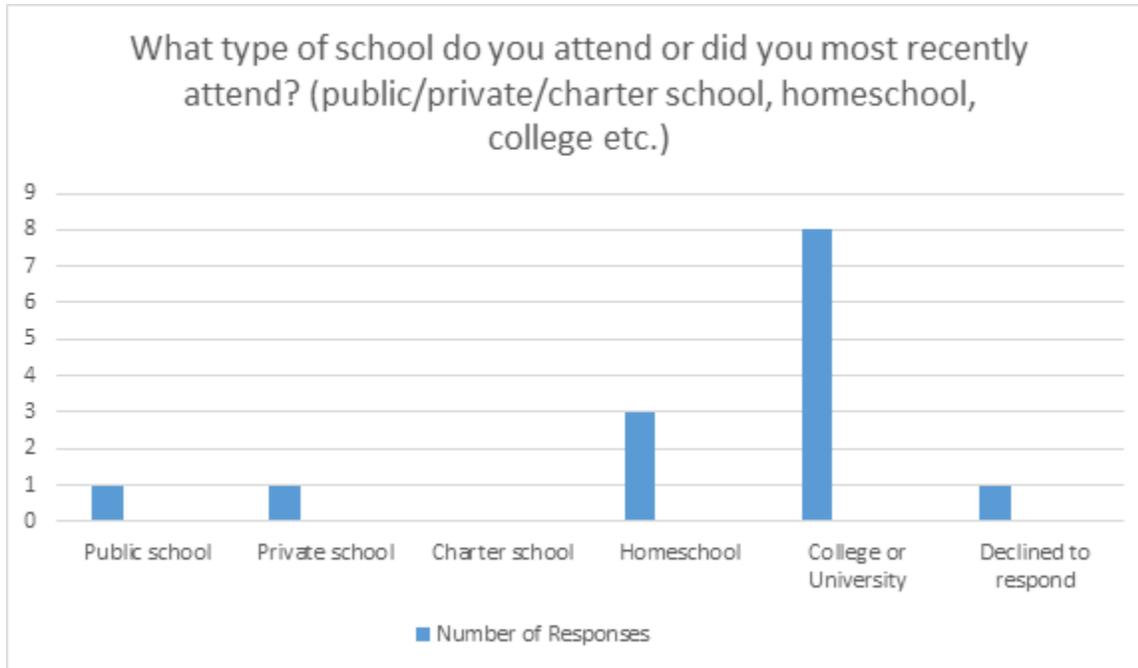
The importance of supporting youth friendships in a vernacular arts community should not overshadow the benefits of intergenerational relationships between youth and older

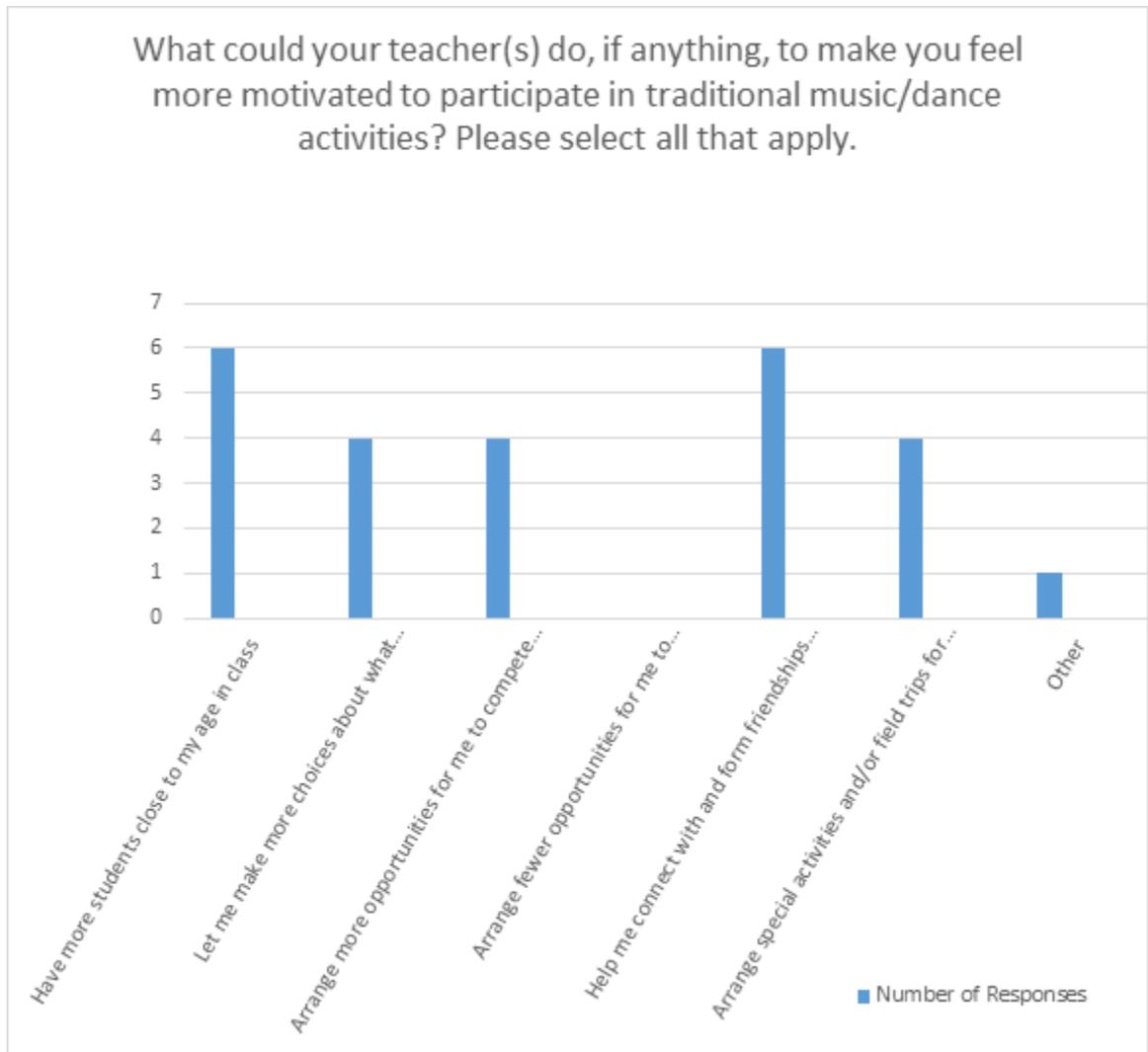
musicians and dancers. Connecting with older adults can lead to increased self-esteem and improved behavior for youth, and the life experiences of older adults can also give young learners an increased sense of historical continuity. Furthermore, adults with expertise in the arts can share their knowledge with the younger members of their community, an especially important factor when considering traditions that are transmitted aurally.⁸ Given these positive outcomes, an intergenerational learning relationship based around the transmission of traditional music and dance can provide both social and cultural benefits. An older adult with extensive life experience and cultural capital could offer knowledge and insight to a young learner that a same-aged peer would not be able to share. Therefore, it is important to remember that intergenerational relationships should not be neglected in the pursuit of developing healthy peer relationships among youth.

Musicians and dancers derive many benefits from the social connections forged through involvement in vernacular music and dance. Children and adolescents in particular experience higher levels of motivation, achievement, and participation due to a greater sense of belonging and enhanced positive peer relationships. Developing friendships among peers with a shared interest in vernacular music and dance can also help youth to combat some of the negative attitudes toward participation in traditional arts that they may experience from other members of their peer group, and more widely the challenges of adolescence itself. It is important for teachers and leaders to actively facilitate the development of positive relationships and proactively address negative social behaviors among the young people participating in their programs: this positive and proactive strategy is greatly enhanced by the fundamentally communal and participatory nature of the vernacular art forms themselves. Even in a traditional arts environment where there are not many youth, fostering healthy friendships among children and adolescents leads to enhanced participation and an engaged and empowered community for all.

APPENDIX

Cited survey questions and results:





¹ Erica Braverman, “Youth Engagement in Traditional Music/Dance - Student Survey.” Survey. www.surveymonkey.com. 6 June 2015.

² U.S. Department of Education, *Fast Facts: Homeschooling* (2012). Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=91>

³ The high number of homeschooled students enrolled in vernacular Irish music and dance is an interesting phenomenon and could be a starting point for future research and investigation.

⁴ J. Juvonen, G. Espinoza, and C. Knifsend, “The Role of Peer Relationships in Student Academic and Extracurricular Engagement,” in *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement*, ed. S. L. Christenson, et al. (New York, NY: Springer, 2012), 387-401.

⁵ S. A. O’Neill, “Youth Music Engagement in Diverse Contexts,” in *Organized Activities as Contexts of Development: Extracurricular Activities, After-School and Community Programs*, ed. J. L. Mahoney, et al. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2005), 255-273.

⁶ C. J. Roseth, D. W. Johnson, and R. T. Johnson, “Promoting Adolescents’ Achievement and Peer Relationships: The Effects of Cooperative, Competitive and Individualistic Goal Structures,” *Psychological Bulletin* 134 (2008): 223-246.

⁷ Conversely, negative interactions with peers can negatively impact young musicians and dancers, leading to negative attitudes towards the community where the interactions take place. Children who are rejected or bullied by their peers demonstrate reduced engagement, participation and achievement. Even a single instance of peer rejection can lead to a reduction in achievement.

⁸ R. Larson, "Building Intergenerational Bonds Through the Arts," *Generations* 30 (2006): 38-41.