

An Evaluation of the Elders' Dance Company pilot programme



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2020

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Figure 1 The Elders' Dance Company

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Executive Summary

The Elders' Dance Company contemporary dance pilot was funded by Northamptonshire Community Foundation and was for people aged 65 years and over. The dance organisation (Dancemind) who facilitated and organised the programme, worked in partnership with the local theatre (the Royal and Derngate), which was the venue for the weekly dance sessions. The sessions were for an hour each week with half an hour afterwards for refreshments. The researcher attended each weekly dance session in the capacity of a volunteer as well as researcher. Duties of the volunteer involved shadowing and supporting the session leaders over the 10 weeks, collecting and supporting monitoring of sessions, taking photos and videos for the dance organisation and setting up the room and helping with refreshments.

*N.B. The 10th week of the programme was not completed due to the implementation of the COVID-19 lockdown.

Aim

The evaluation aimed to answer the following question:

What is the impact of a 10-week contemporary dance programme on participating individuals over the age of 65 years?

Methods

The following methods were used:

Pre and Post-questionnaire

- A pre and post-questionnaire (WHO-5 Wellbeing) was completed pre-programme, however, was not completed post programme due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

Pre and post session words

- Dancers were asked to write a word to describe how they felt pre and post session on 3 randomly selected weeks.

Unstructured group discussion

- A group discussion took place at the end of week 8 to discuss the dancers' experiences and views of the pilot programme.

Key Findings

Mind and Mobility

Dancers were surprised at how much they could achieve physically and cognitively through the creative process of contemporary dance. They were also inspired and motivated to be more physically active at home by rehearsing their moves and stretching.

Creativity, ownership, belonging and exclusivity!

The dancers had enjoyed the creative process. Choreographing parts of the routine had developed their sense of

ownership in the dance and indeed, the group. As the weeks progressed, they started to feel that they belonged, with friendships being formed. As older adults and members of the company, there was an exclusivity to the group with many feeling that opening the company to younger individuals would be less satisfying and rewarding.

For the love of dance and performing

Dancers discussed their love of dance and the choreographed piece they had created with the dance leaders. Because of their role in creating the dance, they had no worries or concerns about performing it. They suggested that performing their work in community nursing homes would benefit the residents as well as themselves as a future ambition.

Conclusion

The evaluation indicates that there was a positive impact on the participating dancers of this pilot programme. The physical and cognitive elements of dancing were discussed, with dancers reporting better flexibility and recall of patterns of movement. The dancers also indicated that the psychological and social aspects of the programme were an important part of the experience: they formed friendships, enjoyed the social interaction and created movement in a flexible, non-judgemental and accepting space.

Recommendations

It was unfortunate that the dancers were unable to perform their routine (which, they had worked hard to perfect) because of the coronavirus pandemic. It is recommended that this programme continues, to allow for the dancers to continue friendships and build upon the physical and cognitive skills and opportunities that this programme initiated.

If interest continues to grow in the Elders' Dance Company, it is recommended that further groups are formed at local and national levels to maintain the sense of ownership, belonging and exclusivity that this group have experienced.

Further evaluation and research is needed to explore the benefits and values of contemporary dance programmes for older people.



Figure 2 Creative dance activity

1 Introduction and aims

1.1 Background

A key public health question in contemporary western societies is how to live healthier lives for longer (Alessi & Rashbrook, 2016)? According to the Centre for Ageing Better (2019), more than half of all people over the age of 65 years in the UK have at least 2

chronic health conditions. As the ageing population continues to grow, this results in an enormous strain on the NHS as well as care services and public spending. There are vast disparities across regions in the UK, with life expectancies and healthy life expectancies varying greatly (Public Health England, PHE, 2019). In Northamptonshire, between 2015-2017 life expectancy at 65 for a female was 20.9 years and healthy life expectancy at 65 for a female was 9.9 years (10 years in poorer health) (PHE, 2019). To improve quality of life in later years, public health messages focus on changing lifestyles to include stopping smoking, reducing alcohol consumption, improving diet and increasing physical activity (Alessi & Rashbrook, 2016). The recently published UK Chief Medical Officers' physical activity guidelines suggest that physical activity for adults offers protection from chronic diseases such as diabetes type 2, coronary heart disease, mental health problems and social isolation. For older adults over 65 years, the guidelines recommend 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise per week with some weight bearing exercise to help maintain bone health (Department of Health and Social Care, 2019). Indeed, the current public health challenge appears to be how to tackle the increasingly sedentary lifestyles, with the overall message being that some activity is better than none.

According to Connolly and Redding (2010), dance can have many positive effects on an older person's physical and psychological wellbeing as well as the social benefits of being part of a dance group. Despite the small amount of research conducted into dance for older people,

there is evidence to suggest that many forms of dance can improve physiological functioning such as balance, gait and muscle strength and psychological wellbeing such as enhancing mood, lowering anxiety and increasing social interaction (Connolly & Redding, 2010). Furthermore, Fancourt and Finn (2019) reported that dance is an activity that can reduce the risk of falling in later life and has the potential to reduce the fear of falling in older adults. Whilst dance styles such as social and aerobic dance have received greater research attention, contemporary dance for older adults is lacking (Connolly & Redding, 2010). As dance has the potential to positively effect many areas of an older adult's life and increase activity levels through an enjoyable and supportive environment, it is important to evaluate this pilot contemporary dance programme and the impact it has on the participating individuals. There is potential to develop this programme locally and nationally in the future with an evaluation study which will inform development.

1.2 Evaluation aims

The aim of this study was to evaluate a 10-week pilot dance programme for people aged over 65 years. The dance programme was provided by a local organisation (Dancemind) – Dancemind is a dance and health organisation promoting health and wellbeing through dance, movement and collaborative arts.

AIM: To evaluate and capture the impact of a contemporary dance programme on people over the age of 65 years.

Research question: What is the impact of a 10-week contemporary dance programme on participating individuals over the age of 65 years?

2 Methods

To answer the question - What is the impact of a 10-week contemporary dance programme on participating individuals over the age of 65 years?

- The WHO5 wellbeing questionnaire was intended to be completed by the dancers prior to the first session and after the last session. It was the intention that overall scores would be compared to see if the wellbeing score had improved over the 10-week programme. However, unfortunately the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdown meant that the final dance session did not go ahead, and post questionnaires were not completed.
- Post-it notes were issued at the beginning and end of 3 randomly selected weekly sessions. Dancers were asked to write down one word which described how they felt. Words pre and post dance session, in combination with the group interview data, were used in the analysis to explore feelings and mood.
- An unstructured group interview was conducted with the group of dancers, facilitators and researcher at the end of week 8 to discuss and evaluate the programme. The group conversation was audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

2.1 Pre and Post session words and unstructured group interview

Three weeks were randomly chosen to ask dancers to write a word that best described how they felt pre and post dance session. These were recorded on post-it notes and stuck to a wall in the studio until the weekly dance and refreshments were completed. Table 1 (p 5) shows the words recorded.

The unstructured group interview took place after the dance hour in week 8. The decision was made to conduct the interview on this week so that dancers had the extra time to rehearse and perform their dance in weeks 9 and 10. Unfortunately, the performance did not take place due to the lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consent was obtained and recorded for all dancers by way of a written consent form. To inform the dancers about what was being asked of them, an information sheet was given to each dancer before gaining consent. This allowed each dancer time to comprehend the information and make an informed choice. Dancers were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time up to the final group discussion, without affecting their attendance or experience of the dance programme.

The consent form requested permission to audiotape the group discussion. Once the research is completed, the audio recording will be destroyed/deleted. Data collected was anonymised. However, all dancers gave verbal consent for photos taken by the dance organisation (Dancemind) to be used for marketing and promotion purposes.

Ethical approval to conduct this evaluation was gained from the Faculty of Arts, Science and Technology Research Ethics Committee, University of Northampton.

2.2 Dancer demographics and recruitment

Dancers were recruited for the 10-week pilot dance programme through the Royal and Derngate theatre, where the weekly dance sessions took place, and working closely with Age UK Northamptonshire, who helped identify and target people who would benefit from the programme. The original 20 dancers registered were all aged over 65 years but not considered a vulnerable population. Criteria for participating in the programme – over 65 years and can move independently. Numbers and dancers changed over the first couple of weeks due to various reasons but mainly to do with physical difficulties. For example, one gentleman of 94 years of age attended the first week but found it too difficult to participate because of his partial blindness. Another lady could not continue as she suffered from vertigo. Table 1 below shows gender, age and health notes of the final 19 dancers. These details were recorded at registration by the Royal and Derngate. No further demographic details were requested.

Table 1 – Dancer Demographics

	Male/Female	Age (at registering)	Health Notes
Dancer 1	Female	70.9	
Dancer 2	Male	81.4	
Dancer 3	Male	73.7	
Dancer 4	Female	71.1	
Dancer 5	Female	65	Hay fever, anxiety, glaucoma, hearing impairment
Dancer 6	Female	70	Allergic to penicillin, scarring on the lungs
Dancer 7	Female	72.1	Diabetes
Dancer 8	Female	Not provided	
Dancer 9	Female	73.6	
Dancer 10	Female	Not provided	
Dancer 11	Male	68.6	
Dancer 12	Female	Not provided	
Dancer 13	Female	69.9	
Dancer 14	Female	Not provided	
Dancer 15	Male	72.8	Undergoing treatment for prostate cancer
Dancer 16	Female	68.2	Allergic to codeine and morphine
Dancer 17	Female	65.7	Hay fever, back pain from previous injury
Dancer 18	Female	70.7	Heart stent
Dancer 19	Female	65.6	

3 Research Findings

This section presents the findings from the pre and post session words and the unstructured group discussion.

3.1 Pre and post session words

Three randomly selected weeks were chosen to ask dancers how they felt before the dance session and then again directly after the dance session. Some dancers found this difficult and in one instance, a dancer drew a smiley face instead of writing a word. Generally, it appeared that words used before sessions were often associated with apprehension and uncertainty (this will be discussed in the next section – 3.2 Mobility and Mind). For the most part, post session words appeared positive and upbeat. Table 2 presents the dancers' words.

Table 2 – Pre and post session words

Pre-session words	Post session words
Slightly apprehensive	Great!
Achy	Happily tired
Worried	Better
Excited	Amused
Nervous	Re-juvenated
Positive	Wonderful
Tired	Good
Ready	Enjoyed
Cold	Pleased with myself
Uneasy	Motivated
Cautious	Uplifted
Discombobulated	Enjoyed
Beautiful	Fabulous!
Breathless	Refreshed
Tired	Weak
Not sure?	Exercised
Anticipation	Stretched
Stressed	Good
Happy	Good
Help	Happy
Happy	Prepared

Wonderful	Exhilarated
Happy	Down
Tired	Good
Good	Inspired
Anxious	Better
Rushed	Brill
Relaxed	Better
Welcome	Happy
Good	Shattered
OK	Happy
Elated	😊
Upbeat	
Concerned	
Painful	
Rushed	
Balance	

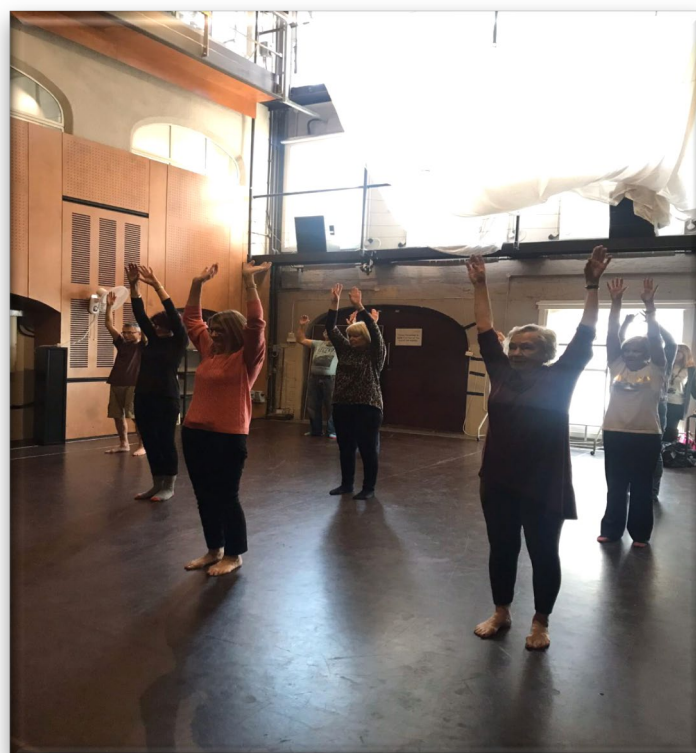


Figure 3 - Dancers warming up

3.2 Mind and Mobility

"I could do much more than I thought I could do" (Elders' Dancer, group discussion).

With reference to the pre-session words and the statement above, many of the dancers appeared to be anxious at the start of the sessions although as the weeks progressed, the researcher observed a noticeable increase in confidence as well as familiarity with what to expect. In the group discussion, all the dancers agreed that they had experienced positive physical and cognitive effects from their participation in the programme.

Dancers discussed the perceived physical benefits of participating in the dance programme, noticing an increase in both mobility and flexibility. For many, it appeared that the weekly hour of dance had inspired them to practice and stretch more at home.

I've found that I'm much more flexible now, just generally. Bending and reaching for things at home. It's almost, my joints have loosened up by doing it. I know it's only once a week, although I do practice [laughs] (Elders' Dancer, group discussion).

Yeah, I think it makes you aware to practice. I mean I go through it in my kitchen, I'm doing it, you know, while I'm [laughing]...it's the exercise, it's the stretching and everything and although it's a dance, it's an exercise as well. And where can people of our age go for exercise? This is what I like about it. I feel I'm gaining more flexibility, more stretching (Elders' Dancer, group discussion).

O'Toole *et al.* (2015) also found that community adults over the age 50 years who participated in a 6-week dance programme reported enhanced physical abilities and increased activity participation. It is also important to note that the second dancer above, questioned where adults of an older age can go to exercise? This highlights the need for more community programmes like the Elders' Dance Company, where older people can participate in group exercise in a relaxed and non-judgemental environment.

Cognitively, many of the dancers referred to their surprise at being able to remember patterns of movement and of how much they could follow and recall. One male dancer found that the programme offered much more than just exercise, stating:

I basically came because I needed something better than the gym for exercise because the gym is boring. This is totally unboring. And it's really opened my eyes completely, you're thinking as well as moving whereas at the gym, you're just moving.

This cognitive element of the findings supports previous research that suggests that dance not only has positive effects on physiology but can also be cognitively stimulating and constant (Cruz-Ferreira, Marmeleira, Formigo, Gomes & Fernandes, 2015); that dance can be considered a “vital cognitive tool” (Connolly & Redding, 2010, p. 24).

3.3 Creativity, ownership, belonging and exclusivity!

“...it's about a group of people coming together and making dance sequences, starting from nothing and ending with a sequence” (Elders' Dancer, group discussion).



Figure 4 - Creativity, ownership, belonging and exclusivity!

According to Tay, Pawelski and Keith (2018), there is still a noticeable absence in the connection between engagement in the arts and humanities and positive outcomes such as life satisfaction, growth and vitality and the psychological and cognitive benefits from performing arts. Certainly, for the Elders' Dancers, by being a part of the creative process, there was not only a sense of ownership in the dance they were performing but also a sense of belonging to the group. One dancer discussed that she had not lived in the town for long, *"...also not knowing anyone in (town) very much because I haven't lived here all my life, it's really great to meet people, you know..."* It is important to highlight the social value of this dance programme in light of the current understandings of the impact of social isolation and loneliness on older adults' health. According to Age UK (2018), by the year 2026, 2 million older adults will be feeling lonely often. Not only will there be an increase in loneliness but more and more older adults are experiencing social isolation – *'a state in which the individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, has a minimal number of social contacts...'* (Nicholson, 2009, p. 1346). Some of the reported health implications of loneliness and social isolation include increased systolic blood pressure, lower immune functioning and infection, impaired cognitive function, depression, sleep problems and mortality (Coyle & Cogan, 2012). The Elders' Dance Company programme resulted in friendships forming and the social value of the programme to provide social interaction was clearly evident. It appeared that the creativity, self-expression, and social interaction that this dance programme provided the dancers, allowed a group of apprehensive strangers to develop into a group who belonged and were comfortable in expressing themselves through creative dance.

A further topic of discussion raised in the group was that of the company name, 'Elders' Dance Company'. One dancer had stated that she did not like the name although most dancers disagreed, with comments such as *'We're proud of it!'* and *'We're old, let's face it!'* However, a further name of **Ageless Dance Company** was proposed with group consensus. There was an exclusivity to the dance group, especially when the question of whether the programme's inclusion criteria of 65 years and over should be lowered. Whilst most of the objections appeared to be concerning physical and cognitive ability relating to their age, there was also a strong sense of the group closing the door to younger members, and that their dance group was exclusive to them.

I think you've got slight problem there with age as well. The fitness. Obviously, we're all getting to a stage where we can't do summersaults and things [laughs] so we've, so we can all 90% carry out what you ask us to do, you could perhaps get too far and alienate some of it....

[Group consensus]

It would become too hard, there would be no satisfaction.

... Can I add something about age? For me, I go to lots of dance classes and I'm just about managing but it's getting harder and harder and each year that goes past it gets harder. The nice thing for me is that I can keep up with this without struggling because the classes I go to, they're mixed from 20 something 30 something and it gets harder and harder and that's an important factor that this is nice because...

I agree totally on that...

I do a lot of dance but as I say, I struggle with as well is memory and I find, in the classes sometimes I can physically do it, but I can't remember quickly enough and it's all moving too fast a pace...

3.4 For the love of dance and performing

What were the reasons that you signed up for this?

I love dancing! (Elders' Dancer, group discussion)

Group members enjoyed dancing, and some had previous and/or current experience of various forms of dancing. One male dancer revealed that him and his wife had previously been Latin American silver medal dancers. A female dancer discussed how she had been suffering with her mental health before joining the Elders' Dance Company:

I wanted to quickly say that one of the reasons I came here, more for mental reasons because at the time I was falling into a hole and a friend who does voluntary work here pointed this course out to me. So, I came on it and I do feel a lot better for it...I was isolating myself, so I was really getting into a hole...I love it! I like to dance, and it has done me a lot of good.... (Elders' Dancer, group discussion).



Figure 5 - Elders' Dance Company rehearsing

Furthermore, one female dancer noted that by continuing with the company, not only would they benefit by doing something they love being a part of, but the Company could also have a positive role in the community. The dancer suggested that they could perform their dances in care and nursing homes. Talking from her experience as a nurse, she proposed that:

It would be nice, if this carries on, that we can go to different communities or the places that we can perform or probably go to the nursing homes. I used to be a nurse and I worked in a care home, looking at them, the beauty, the looks when someone was performing, it lights up their heart and the look on their face. You know, all they do all day is get up, sit, eat, watch television....

Dancers talked about how they did not seem to be phased by the thought of performing their dance. It was decided that the reasons for this were since firstly, they loved what they were doing and secondly, as per the previous findings, they had contributed in the choreography through the creative process. They loved it and they would be happy to perform it.

4 Conclusion

This section draws out the key findings of the evaluation. It was unfortunate and disappointing that the Elders' Dance Company could not complete their last week with the planned performance. The rehearsal in week 9 had gone very well but there had been uncertainty at whether the last week would happen with the anticipated coronavirus lockdown. Hence, the post programme wellbeing questionnaire was not completed and there was no measurement recorded to compare well-being scores pre and post programme.

The evaluation set out to understand what impact this pilot contemporary dance programme had on the participating individuals. Data from the group discussion and the pre and post session words clearly indicated that the programme had an overwhelming positive impact on the dancers.

When looking at the findings reported, there were not only the physical and cognitive benefits associated with the practice of dance but also psycho-social elements that appeared to be just as important to the dancers. Being active and creative within the group appeared to promote positive feelings and indeed, relationships. Belonging to this 'exclusive' group had an observed psychological and social benefit. Furthermore, the dancers wanted to share the enjoyment that they gained from this programme by performing within the community for the benefit of others.

5 Recommendations

This section provides recommendations which have been identified through the evaluation.

- According to Hui, Chui and Woo (2009), with the development of dance programmes, dancing for older adults has the potential to be an effective means of health promotion and disease prevention. Therefore, it is recommended that the Elders' Dance Company continues to dance, create, rehearse, perform, develop and flourish through available funding.
- While many of the dancers would recommend the company to others, there was a concern that the social and inclusive atmosphere of the group could be challenged by younger or a greater number of dancers. It is recommended that if interest in the programme continues to increase, separate dance companies be formed and funded locally and nationally.
- Overall, this evaluation has provided the start of an evidence base for the Elders' Dance Company which has identified a positive impact on the dancers. Future research can build on this through various different research methods and measures to gain a more in-depth understanding of how the dance programme can improve the health and wellbeing of older adults.



Figure 6 - The Elders' Dance Company

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Dancemind

The logo for Dancemind features the word "Dancemind" in a bold, purple, sans-serif font. A stylized, curved graphic element in shades of green and yellow arches over the letters "m" and "i", resembling a dance move or a wave.