



Elders Dance Project

Executive Summary

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Photography Alison Denholm

This report details the evaluation conducted by researchers of the University of Nottingham, working with dance facilitators, project coordinators and participants of the Elders Dance Project hosted by Art in Mind, and supported by City Arts (Nottingham) to evaluate a newly-led dance project for older people. Four dance groups were held amongst three different locations within urban districts of Nottingham. A triangulation of methods were used in combining observations, reflections and interviews to gather data. The evaluation and subsequent report seeks to capture the imaginative work such dance projects have to offer older people, within what are often perceived as being isolative and fragmented communities.

The Elders Dance Project began in June 2009 funded by the One Nottingham neighbourhood renewal small grants scheme. The idea emerged from Art in Mind, a group who promote social inclusion, mental health and well being through different forms of art. This programme was delivered on behalf of Art in Mind by City Arts Nottingham and led by two dance facilitators for an average period of eight weeks per group. The programme was specifically designed for older people, encouraging them to become more physically active whilst creating greater social networks and affording new opportunities. Furthermore, whilst recognising that this dance project was never intended as being a 'cure all', additional aims and priorities of this project were to encourage dance and movement in older adults to support health and fitness, develop balance and coordination skills, and most importantly, be enjoyable and fun. Data collection was conducted across different sites within Nottingham. Venues included; Alexandra Lodge, Radford Care Group and the Indian Community Centre Association (ICCA).





Vina Ladwa leading a session with Asian Elders at the New Indian Community Centre



Jenny Edwards leading a session with residents at the Alexandra Lodge Care Home

Informal interviews were conducted with dance facilitators and participants at the end of the dance sessions. These interviews were digitally recorded and later anonymised and transcribed. It was felt that such an approach would yield a more accurate representation of the group process and the individuals within it; allowing direct quotes and personal experiences to form part of this report.

The observational and interview data were used to explore the personal and interpersonal benefits of dance at both individual and interpersonal levels. The data collected were analysed and interpreted using a thematic analysis approach. Both similarities and differences were sought and commonalities noted in what was said by the dance facilitators and participants. The data were subsequently grouped into common recurring themes and presented as such within the findings.

It is recognised that this evaluation has limitations in not being able to fully explore the long-term effects of dance upon people's health. This evaluation however seeks to capture people's experiences of dance upon their individual wellbeing as a result of taking part in the activity. This report attempts to describe both the immediate and potential contributions dance has to offer in people's lives.

The initial observations and reflections of the researcher focused on the apparent and seemingly striking differences between how the dance groups were facilitated. Such differences however, demonstrated how complex and diverse the art of dance can be. Culture, identity and individuality appeared to be the main factor influencing such differences.

Many personal and interpersonal benefits were noted within all the dance groups and much positive feedback was gained through all those involved. The changes on an individual level varied greatly and to differing degrees for each individual. However, what became apparent was that any change, no matter how small, was unique to the individual and therefore a cause for celebration. Any change within an individual had the ability and power to transform a person's self-perception as well as the perception of others.



Personal Benefits

Personal benefits of being involved in the dance group included an increased self-awareness and greater sense of self-confidence. This was often associated with greater interaction, engagement

and socialisation with others, as well as more eye contact and a freer sense of self-expression. Comments were made suggestive of dance raising awareness, being educative and holding the ability to uplift a person's mood. The following are extracts from the researcher's observations, informal conversations and interviews with dance facilitators and participants;

"The most dramatic change is the fact that when you first walk in there, people are like wallpaper sat at the side of the room, no none is talking to each other at all, there is no laughter, there are just tellies and by the end of the session everyone is sitting in a circle, there is no telly and there are several staff in the middle having a giggle who I have to remind to dance with the residents they're having so much fun, and everyone is laughing, looking at each other, engaged and that is just huge, just a huge thing to be celebrated; it's lifted everybody's mood, everyone's smiling..."
(Dance Facilitator)

"One gentleman, I was told usually sat alone in the porch, however on this occasion had chosen to sit amongst others to observe the dance room being set up. Although he did not join in with the group he came in afterwards to join in conversation with others and talk about their experiences which appeared to be a step forward for him..."
(Observations from 24th July 2009)

"I did exercise and it was fun"
(Participant)



Exercise almost becomes a secondary element to the enjoyment and fulfilment that dance offers. As one dance facilitator suggests, the changes in mood are instant even though the physical effects of dance may take longer;

"Alexandra Lodge was the longest running but you're not going to see massive physical changes in nine weeks; what I have seen is more eye contact, more awareness of sound, surroundings and engagement which is a huge issue; which is

particularly important in that group because there are some incredibly frail individuals and some potentially violent individuals...”
(Dance Facilitator)



Dance then seemingly becomes a motivator for self-improvement; providing an alternative and positive outlet for self-expression whilst encouraging socialisation with others in a way that is constructive, affirming and beneficial for all involved.

Interpersonal Benefits

Whilst there will be some inevitable crossovers, overlaps and common characteristics between both personal and interpersonal benefits to dance and health, a great sense of community spirit appeared to be achieved through the dance groups. A group identity and sense of unity was formed. Through dance, transformations in individual abilities and capabilities also appeared apparent with altered staff perceptions of residents and participants in dance;

“It’s interesting what the staff have been surprised by as well, there are some members of the group the staff have just been amazed by because they have just been contributing so much... there’s one lady who is just so incredibly fragile but she will do everything as fully as she can, she will contribute to her fullest and what I’d like to see is staff’s ability to look and see and recognise that contribution and celebrate it and it is the shift of perspective that’s the major success.. That’s the eye-opener and that’s where you get the progress and change...”
(Dance Facilitator)

“Dance is sociable; we are nothing without our community...”
(Dance Facilitator)

“Dance is reaffirming, giving a sense of identity as a group; expanding the creative possibilities as a group and celebrating that...”
(Dance Facilitator)



Individuality, Culture & Identity

The delivery of the sessions were conducted in such a way as to make the sessions culturally sensitive and unique. The dance groups held at Alexandra Lodge and the Radford Care Centre were largely attended by White British participants. The participants at the ICCA however, by definition, were either Gujarati or Punjabi; the groups at the ICCA being delivered in one of the two respective languages.

The dance groups held at Alexandra Lodge and the Radford Care Centre were very much centred around music associated with western culture whilst dance groups at the ICCA would focus largely on Hindu stories. The importance of familiarity and being able to identify not only with the dance movements but also the musicalities and deliveries of dance therefore seem paramount.

“I realised that this art form is not just for older people or people from a certain culture but for everyone just to perform; it can be for children as young as four or five years old... I’m using the same movements... they’re used to their language and not mine but if I use their language they can connect with the same movements...”
(Dance Facilitator)

Dance itself is thus universal and can be appreciated by all. The language used to describe dance conversely, are possibly what separate and distinguish different artistic movements and art forms associated with dance from other cultures.

The importance of individuality was acknowledged amongst all four dance groups. However, more importantly, sensitivity was given to this notion in how the dance groups were delivered. Recognition

of the complexities of individuality were implied during interviews and conversations with dance facilitators, participants and carers. These included individuality in terms of physical and cognitive ability, cultural, religious and spiritual identity. The importance of language and cultural heritage was recognised as well as the recognition of the importance in finding a common ground from which to work and express oneself; both as individuals and as a uniformed group;

“Dance allows people to have the ability to be individuals; to allow people to achieve their full capacity...”
(Dance Facilitator)



Potential Barriers & Challenges

Dance as an alternative form of exercise appears to remain a fairly new phenomenon amongst many care groups. Understanding the potential benefits that dance has to offer therefore appears very much within its initial stages with further support required;

“Dance is a new initiative here and so there is a lack of clear understanding as to what it is, it’s aims etc...”
(Dance Facilitator)

“I would like to see this project developed and supported more; I think the staff need individual training away from the residents; they’ve got the enthusiasm they’ve got the awareness, they now need the support and confidence to take that and make it their own; after nine weeks you can’t expect anyone to have that...”
(Dance Facilitator)

Dance Potential

The relationships between the participants and the person leading the dance sessions appeared to be an important aspect for dance facilitators. To be able to see improvements in people's moods, health and wellbeing, to feel inspired and motivated as well as being able to sustain such dance projects were all cited as being important factors for the future of dance and health.

"In the space of an hour everyone's happier and that's what needs to happen... We've left an atmosphere that will sustain and it's about people..."

(Dance Facilitator)



"It would be great to do more groups and bring them together to make a production of it; it can happen; take them somewhere else to dance; they will be so good with the stories..."

(Dance Facilitator)

Through involvement in this dance project, it became apparent that a social activity is very much needed amongst older adults. Dance, however, has the added benefits of creativity, individuality and self-expression in a non-verbal form. The social interaction, individual, community and group identities offered through dance encourage the fostering of relationships and familiarity.

Culture, music and memories are all important aspects of a person's identity which can all be expressed through dance and shared with others. A social dance group provides a means of activity and structure for people to look forward to; something to talk about with others; sharing common interests and experiences. People's moods can be uplifted and transformed within a short space of time; demonstrated within these dance groups in the space of an hour. Whilst the physical health benefits may take longer and may seem secondary, people's physical, psychological, social and spiritual well-being are well known to be interlinked determinants of health.

The delivery of the dance group appears to be as important as the activity itself in terms of the facilitators' relationships and awareness of the participants needs. Culturally specific dance appears to have its place as a particular form of dance unifying people and their sense of identities. Culturally specific dance however, appears to be seldom used within practice.

Despite dance having been around for centuries, the notion of dance as an alternative form of exercise remains not without its challenges. Many of these positively appear not to be as a result of lack of interest from staff or participants, but rather due to a lack of awareness, appropriate education and training. This evaluation is limited to the area of Nottingham in which the dance project was held, however, research would suggest that there is scope for greater use of creative arts, and more specifically dance, in promoting social inclusion, activity and exercise for older people.



Statistics of the delivery of the project

Total number of participants = 74

White British = 25

Asian/ Asian British (Indian) = 49

Facilitator	Jenny Edwards	Jenny Edwards	Vina Ladwa	Vina Ladwa
Location	Radford Care Group	Alexandra Lodge	ICC Gujarati Group	ICC Punjabi & Hindi Group
Dates	18-Jun	11-May	21-Jul	22-Jul
	25-Jun	18-May	28-Jul	29-Jul
	09-Jul	01-Jun	04-Aug	05-Aug
	16-Jul	08-Jun	25-Aug	26-Aug
	22-Jul	15-Jun	08-Sep	09-Sep
	24-Jul	22-Jun	15-Sep	16-Sep
		29-Jun	22-Sep	23-Sep
		06-Jul		
		13-Jul		
		20-Jul		
Total number of participants	11	14	25	24