

Mainstream not marginalised

Based on a work-based doctorate in Professional Studies
freelance advisor, presenter and older dancer

Dr Jacqueline Richards talks about an evolving
social phenomenon that is rising up social, health
and political agendas, affecting the dancing world –
dance for active older people





Above and left: Creative Dance 60+, dance-artist/facilitator Molly Wright. Photos: Jo Alexander

The final outcome of my doctorate was an exploratory case study research report, Active Older People Participating in Creative Dance – Challenging Perceptions.

The research involved: in-depth interviews with some older people who were choosing to dance; conversations with several leading dance providers/decision-makers; my own narrative and observations from work/dance activities; and desk-top research from different reports and academic disciplines.

In 2008, I left my fulltime management career. I was 60 years old, healthy, with lots of energy. I had more time to follow personal interests, especially returning to dancing. Dance available locally included line-dancing, ballroom dancing (my parents' generation social dance!), aerobic dance at a local gym (lovely instructor but boring sequences) and 'armchair' / gentle exercise (definitely not me!).

I soon found people aged between 60-105+ were often regarded as a single cohort, 'retired' or 'pensioners', marginalised from mainstream adult life. I just thought of myself as an adult who had left fulltime work. Not all older people are vulnerable or frail.

The BBC broadcasted a documentary about Sadler's Wells' Company of Elders in June 2009 and I attended a complementary workshop. It was challenging. Some participants,

including myself, stayed afterwards to express interest.

In *Animated* magazine ('The fair game', Autumn 2009 edition), Fiona Ross, then Sadler's Wells' Director of Creative Learning, recounted the interest shown: "I was... held to ransom by a group... demanding to know when Sadler's Wells was going to set up more classes to accommodate their interest."

Sadler's Wells received requests from many UK locations and Fiona stated the biggest challenge was responding to the waves of enthusiasts. She thought demand demonstrated the disappointing visibility of UK community dance and lack of awareness about quality dance opportunities. She suggested more promotion was needed. However, my research found there were insufficient dance opportunities for older dancers in 2009.

Nine years later, although there is increasing demand and provision, it remains patchy. Growing numbers of older people want to dance but do not want gentle exercise to pass away time. Neither do they dance just to keep fit, although this might be their reason for starting. They enjoy expressing themselves, developing their abilities, being challenged. They are pleased to make new friendships with a common interest. This sometimes is a surprise:

"I've always been independent... but

not to do things like going dancing and things on my own because I just think it wasn't my lifestyle... that's not what people like me do. We go to Church, we go to work, home and that's it... it's about opening up to a lot of different things." Toni, 63, London.

My research findings are now becoming realities. Policy-makers are taking the ageing population seriously. The statutory retirement age has gone; older adults are encouraged to remain active, independent and socially engaged. More positive images are appearing in the media. But western society still has negative and positive assumptions and attitudes towards being older. Just think about your own ageing. How do you imagine your older self? Negative fears and assumptions can creep into consciousness but, increasingly, people can remain reasonably healthy and active for years. There is life after fulltime work and bringing up families! We are all individuals with different life experiences and needs.

There is not yet agreed terminology to differentiate groupings of older people. Many factors including health, education, income, personality etc. affect people's lives and expectations. It is important there are different dance choices available, so people can dance as they wish. Dance activities can transform lives because confidence and self-esteem grow,



Creative Dance 60+, dance-artist/facilitator Molly Wright. Photo: Jo Alexander

and new friendships develop. Dancers can experience increased joy and happiness, be creative, expressive and adapt to challenges.

Older people can attend general adult dance classes. Proficient facilitators can take account of individuals' requirements. However, the overall pace and presentation might not match older people's capabilities. Increasingly, many prefer to attend sessions with peers. They often have different learning styles, memory issues and different physicality from younger dancers. Sessions need to be welcoming, with the dance process targeted at participants' aspirations and capabilities. I know 'active older people's creative dance' is a long, clumsy concept but it gives a boundary. For some, they are returning having danced a lot when young, but for others it is a totally new experience.

There is evidence that creativity should be encouraged throughout adult life (1). All ages can benefit from using their imaginations and developing their capabilities (2). As we age, recklessness and creating ideas becomes more difficult but older people compensate by connecting ideas together using wisdom and experience. Creativity comes from hard work, routines and habit (3).

Dance activities are directly influenced by resources, dance

organisations' policies and dance artists'/ facilitators' availability and interests. Different factions in the dance world are responding to increasing demand and finding a stronger voice. Lansley and Early (4) suggest making and practising dance is relevant to its social context and everyone has a right to participate. In future, new dance language and processes will develop. These ideas support my findings, that older people's dance can be recognised as mainstream in its own right, having its own aesthetic and communicating to audiences.

Signs of this recognition include the successful Sadler's Wells Elixir Festivals and Conferences (2014 and 2017). Around the UK, increasing numbers of dance sessions and many new dance performance groups have formed. In 2014 People Dancing held an international conference in Cardiff that recognised previous community dance connotations and images were no longer useful. Ways people wish to dance are changing. Dance artists want to create their own art and dancers, including many older dancers, will want to dance for its own sake. They do not want to be regarded as vulnerable.

Dance artists and facilitators who have trusting, respectful leadership qualities may wish to create choreography or facilitate

dance sessions for older people, intergenerational groups and for younger people. Hopefully, in future, it will not be acceptable for older adults to be marginalised, only performing at events with young children.

Professional dancers, choreographers and facilitators will extend their careers as demand increases. It will become normal to see older people dancing. Older people's dancing challenges perceptions of ageing. It gives younger people hope because they see getting older is not only about decline, isolation and pain but also about positive futures. They will see older dancers being expressive, dancing about meaningful issues and enjoying themselves. Many people in the second half of life (5) aged 50+ are creative, positive, enjoying life and want to share their experiences. Dance benefits cultural life and the health and wellbeing of the whole population and helps to create more age-friendly communities. This not only benefits them as individuals but also their families and communities and ultimately the world.

More dance! Towards peace and a better world!

Info

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For the full 'Active Older People Participating in Creative Dance – Challenging Perceptions' report, including new knowledge and useful information, visit eprints.mdx.ac.uk/23514

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