



Dance as a recreational activity for young people

By Dr Linda Ashley

Infinite Dance Crew

This first in a series of articles about specific sectors of dance provision in New Zealand focuses on the importance and potential benefits of dance as a recreational activity for young people.

“It’s something that you can remember... one good thing that you did in your life.”
(Intermediate school participant reflects on a recreational dance experience, from Aya Nakamura’s 2010 Honours research project, AUT)

Recreational dance can differ in its cultural setting or its inclusion of competitive or examinable elements. However some benefits for young dancers could be common across the sector.

Anecdotal evidence abounds about the benefits of active participation in dance from those who work in the recreation sector. Jane Carter, founder of *Pocket Rockets* an after school dance group for pre-primary and primary school aged children, has collected parents’ testimonials:

“He has loved *Pocket Rockets* and it really has helped him grow.”

“They love your classes and I love knowing how your classes help develop our girls confidence in

themselves.”

Current Director of youth dance company *Pointy Dog*, Jessie McCall finds that:

“Dance encourages young people to find new ways of relating to themselves and to each other, which I think is an incredible opportunity to develop empathy and expand perspectives that translate into other areas of their lives.”

Nevertheless, advocacy for funding such ventures could be improved if evidence from more robust research could be provided. In 2008 *SPARC (Sport and Recreation New Zealand)* collected data via surveys, activity diaries and interviews from 4,443 participants and found dance to be the 5th most popular recreational activity for 16-24 years age group. *SPARC’s 2011 Young People’s Survey* (under their new name of *Sport New Zealand, SNZ*) identified low rates of participation in ‘sport’ during teenage years particularly for girls. It also identified dance as the



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second most likely activity in which girls aged 11-18 years participated. Such research findings validate dance as a recreational activity for young people that warrants increased provision.

SNZ's survey classified dance under "other recreational activities" and reported that girls do not see dance as being a sport because the focus is not on winning. It does not tell us what boys thought. However, crossing the divide between dance and elite athleticism can feature in dance as recreation:

"From a physical point of view the dancers I am fortunate enough to work with are some of the fittest and strongest I have come across. They are performing athletes and are both physically and mentally engaged in what they are doing." (Erin Bowerman, AUT Bachelor of Dance graduate recently completed research with a focus on Dance Science for the AUT Master of Sport and Exercise (1st class))

Bowerman works with girls aged 8 to 16 in classical ballet within a private studio setting. Crossing the recreational/pre-vocational borders these dancing athletes look to excellence and employment. Also it is important to note that dance can be competitive as

manifest in hip hop championships, *Polyfest*, ballet and ballroom dance competitions. Research into such arenas could produce some persuasive 'sporty' evidence.

SNZ note that their research is consistent with many overseas studies. *Child's Play: Children's Participation in Organised Sport or Dancing* (Australia's Bureau of Statistics) found that girls were 5% less likely to have participated than boys. ABS's *Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities* reported that dancing was the most popular activity for females (367,400 participants). Canada's *Actively Engaging Women and Girls* and Northern Ireland's 2010 *Young People and Sport* provide similar results.

When conducted by dance researchers, particularly valuable research emerges. Led by dance scientists and researchers, *Dance 4 Your Life* (North Kent Local Authorities Arts Partnership, the Laban Centre and Arts Council England) assessed the potential health benefits (physiological and psychological) of a "dynamic" contemporary dance programme on 55 female 14-year-olds once weekly for 6 or 10 weeks over two school terms. It found increases in physical fitness,

upper body strength, self-esteem and self-motivation. This rigorous study, albeit school-based, points the way to the type of research that could be most useful in advocating for increasing investment in recreational dance in Aotearoa. *The Effects of Participation in Performing Arts for Health in Young People* (Centre for Public Health Research, University of West England, UK, 2006) draws attention to the need for increasing high quality evaluation of recreational programmes.

Based on similar concerns about teenage girls' participation, a model that could provide a platform for robust research in Aotearoa comes from *Sportscotland* (in partnership with Scottish Youth Dance, Youth Scotland and The Youth Sport Trust). The *YDance Active Girls Project* aims to train girls aged 13+ as leaders for their schools and/or local communities nationally across Scotland. One-day workshops in secondary schools are initially set up to inspire and motivate. Then girls can apply for a 4 to 5 day intensive, leading to an Award in Dance Leadership. Since the project started in September 2012 *YDance* has delivered workshops for 5,360 girls, worked in 243 Scottish secondary schools and trained 945 teenage dance leaders.

It is timely to encourage those working in the recreational dance sector to lobby Sport New Zealand and other funding bodies to kick start some rigorous research into the ways in which dance can improve the quality of life for Aotearoa's young people. ■

Useful websites for Dance as a recreational activity for young people.

- YDance Active www.ydance.org
- Dance 4 Your Life www.nklaap.com
- Sport and Recreation in the Lives of Teenagers - Sport New Zealand www.sportnz.org.nz
- Actively Engaging Women and Girls Across Ontario - Canadian Association for the Advancement of Women and Sport and Physical Activity www.caaws.ca
- The Effects of Participation in Performing Arts for Health on Young People: A Systematic Review of the Published Literature 1994-2004 hsc.uwe.ac.uk
- Young People and Sport 2010 (Ireland) - www.dcalni.gov.uk
- Child's Play: Children's Participation in Organised Sport or Dancing - www.abs.gov.au
- Girls in Sport Intervention and Research Project, NSW, Australia www.sports.det.nsw.edu.au
- Fit For Girls, Sport Scotland www.youthsporttrust.org

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