



Bringing Dance to Older Adults: Program Experts' Perspectives on the Role of Community Dance Classes to Support Older Adults

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Article

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Résumé

Contexte: La danse présente plusieurs bienfaits potentiels pour la santé et le mieux-être des personnes âgées. Elle peut promouvoir la culture de l'activité physique et influencer positivement sur le processus du vieillissement. Pourtant, peu d'études se penchent sur les points de vue des intervenants qui ont une expérience en travail auprès des personnes âgées et en organisation d'activités de danse communautaires.

Objectif: L'objectif de cette étude était de comprendre les points de vue d'experts sur la façon dont les activités communautaires de danse destinées aux personnes âgées peuvent promouvoir la culture de l'activité physique et contribuer au développement de villes et d'initiatives communautaires adaptées aux personnes âgées.

Méthodes and Résultats: Notre analyse d'entreviens semi-structurés menés avec cinq experts en organisation d'activités communautaires a fait ressortir quatre thèmes : 1) les animateurs experts adaptent les cours en fonction des besoins et intérêts des participants; 2) l'authenticité et le lien social sont au cœur de ce qui nous attire dans la danse; 3) les conceptions élitistes, capacitistes et genrées de la danse entravent l'inclusion des personnes âgées dans des espaces de danse; et 4) une collaboration intersectorielle est nécessaire pour offrir des activités de danse accessibles, durables et prisées.

Discussion: L'étude propose des recommandations pour la conception et la mise en œuvre d'activités communautaires de danse destinées aux personnes âgées.

Abstract

Background: Dancing offers several health and wellness benefits for older adults: it may promote physical literacy (PL) and positively influence the aging process. Yet, limited research considers the perspectives of those with experience working with older adults and in community dance programming.

Objective: The purpose of this study was to understand program experts' perspectives on how older adult community dance can promote PL and contribute to age-friendly cities and community initiatives.

Methods and Findings: Four themes were identified from semi-structured interviews with five program experts: (1) expert instructors tailor classes to participants' needs and interests; (2) the heart of what draws us to dancing: authentic experience and social connection; (3) elitist, ableist, and gendered assumptions of dance prevent social inclusion of older adults in dancing spaces; and (4) collaboration across sectors is needed to offer accessible, sustainable, and valued dance programming.

Discussion: Recommendations for developing and implementing older adult community dance programming are described.

Introduction

Dance is a creative and participatory physical activity with the potential to develop one's embodied communication and physical literacy (PL) (Barrett & Winters, 2013). *Community dance* is a distinct form of participatory dance that takes a deliberately inclusive approach by providing opportunities for any/everyone to participate in various community contexts and includes any/all forms of dance and dance participation (People Dancing, 2022). People Dancing (2022) identifies key pillars of community dance: community dance invites all people to participate, can occur in various settings or contexts, spans various genres or modes of participation, and is led by a professional dance artist. Community dance is distinctive from

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dance movement therapy, which is defined as a psychotherapeutic intervention where movement is used as the modality to promote wellness and healing (American Dance Therapy Association, 2020). Dance serves many societal functions, including entertainment, education, community rituals, artistic expression, spiritual practice, and physical exercise (National Dance Education Organization, n.d.; Fortin, 2018) and has been shown to relate positively to key determinants of health and indicators of well-being across the lifespan (Sheppard & Broughton, 2020).

Given the globally aging population (World Health Organization [WHO], 2015), targeting the needs of older adults is important when promoting health and establishing supportive contexts that encourage conditions for aging well. The concept and related public health framework of *healthy aging* is being adopted globally (Buffel et al., 2018; WHO, 2020). Healthy aging focuses on maintaining functional ability and well-being in the later years and enabling older adults to actively participate in society by optimizing physical, mental, and social health (Government of Canada, 2010; WHO, 2015). Physical activity, positive mental health, social connectedness, and age-friendly environments contribute to healthy aging (Government of Canada, 2010; WHO, 2015). PL and age-friendly initiatives are two ways to support healthy aging and enhance quality of life in the later years.

PL is a concept that describes having the knowledge, understanding, motivation, confidence, and physical competence to stay physically active across the lifespan (Whitehead, 2010). This holistic view of PL encompasses physical, cognitive, social, and affective domains and brings a lifelong and lived embodiment perspective to human movement (Whitehead, 2010). Jones et al. (2018) propose that an ecological approach incorporating intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy elements is an appropriate way to promote and support PL for older adults. Community dance is an enjoyable recreational pursuit and is among the suggested activities that can promote PL in the later years (Higgs et al., 2019). Yet, studies investigating the links between dance and PL in older adults are lacking.

The World Report on Ageing and Health (WHO, 2015) stresses the importance of creating age-friendly environments and the need for cities and communities to enhance older people's abilities to have their basic needs met, to be mobile, to maintain relationships, to contribute, and to learn, grow, and make decisions. *Age-friendly cities and communities* is a global movement aimed at improving the quality of life for older citizens (WHO, 2018). Although the arts are not explicitly mentioned in the Age-Friendly Cities and Communities initiative, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Arts, Health and Wellbeing Inquiry Report (APPG, 2017) asserts that engagement in the arts is central to healthy aging and demonstrates several areas in which the arts intersect with age-friendly policy. A recent review from the WHO has begun to identify the role of arts in supporting health and wellness (Fancourt & Finn, 2019), but health policy documents frequently overlook the potential of arts in this field (APPG, 2017). Despite this, community dance shows promise as an approach to encourage healthy aging. As such, it is receiving growing public attention and research interest, yet little is known about how communities implement dance programming for older adults and how dance supports PL for older adults.

The current study is embedded within a larger research project exploring the benefits of community dance for older adults. Three articles which focused on a community dance program in Calgary formed the case study. These studies include interviews with older adult dance participants (Paglione et al., 2024), interviews with the dance instructor (Paglione et al., 2023), and observations of

instructor pedagogy behaviours (Magrath et al., 2022). The current study adds to this work by exploring community experts' perspectives of the implementation, design, and support of older adult dance programs to gain an understanding of how such programs can be more optimally offered.

Recent work from Menec et al. (2023) has explored the implementation of community dance programming in rural communities. They highlight that the capacity of staff, access to necessary resources (e.g., Internet availability for online programming, and space or centres to host programming), engagement of volunteers, and actions or decisions of community leaders all influence the success of community dance programs (Menec et al., 2023). In Canadian urban centres, there are some examples of classes being offered in dance-specific spaces (e.g., Scotiabank Dance Centre in Vancouver, Decidedly Jazz Danceworks in Calgary, and Canada's National Ballet School in Toronto). Our current study hopes to build upon the work of Menec et al. (2023) focusing on how dance programs can be implemented and sustained in a large urban city which has an Age-Friendly Strategy. Therefore, our purpose was to understand how older adult community dance can play a role in promoting PL and contribute to age-friendly cities and communities initiatives from the perspectives of community leaders. The research questions were: (1) what do program experts perceive as effective in supporting older adults' PL and social connection related to community dance programs? (2) what barriers do program experts perceive as preventing older adults from participating in community dance opportunities? and (3) according to program experts, what is needed to develop and maintain community dance classes for older adults?

Methods

Methodology and design

The present study was guided by a relativist ontology, which acknowledges multiple potentially contradictory realities (Lee, 2012) and a constructivist epistemology, which theorizes knowledge as being constructed by individuals and influenced by social interactions (Creswell, 2013). The constructivist perspective also recognizes the researchers' influence study findings (Creswell, 2013). This philosophical position was chosen with reference to the aims of this study which sought to learn how community dance can support older adults' PL and healthy aging. Semi-structured interviews with program experts were conducted, transcribed, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Participants

Five participants were recruited from one large Western Canadian city. This city offered noteworthy exploration given its municipal age-friendly strategy and was the location of the program examined in earlier phases of the larger research project. Recruiting participants from this city allowed the authors to target individuals with specific and diverse expertise, using the research team's networks within the dance and recreational sectors. Additionally, some community dance classes within this city are associated with a university or research project (including the program the previous publications examined) and therefore experts may have specific knowledge or expertise, and potentially a greater willingness to share about their programming.

Participants with diverse expertise were intentionally recruited, allowing researchers to explore multiple perspectives that could

inform the research. Participant 1 was a dance educator who has experience teaching dance across the age spectrum, including older adults. They have taught older adult dance classes in the city in various organizations and settings. They also have experience teaching yoga classes which included older adult participants. Participant 2 has a breadth of teaching experience both in dance and within a post-secondary institution. They have expertise in developing, establishing, and teaching community dance programs throughout the city, and have previously mentored other dance educators instructing older adults. Participant 3's professional experience was focused on health and PL promotion. They have experience working with and training physical activity leaders to work with a variety of populations and to support lifelong participation in physical activity. Participant 4 was a dance educator with over two decades of experience teaching dance at an older adult recreational centre. Participant 5 worked in the recreation sector and provided expertise on recreational programming and older adult physical activity including dance. Participants will hereafter be referred to as program experts. Additionally, we acknowledge the varied terminology used to describe those who lead community dance classes and have chosen to use the term dance instructor hereafter, though we recognize the collaborative approach between instructors and class participants.

Procedures

Ethical approval from the institution's research ethics review board was obtained prior to the study commencing. Using purposive sampling, individuals with relevant expertise were identified through the research team's networks and invited to participate in the study via e-mail. All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Participants completed one semi-structured interview lasting 51–120 minutes. A second interview was available to participants if the interview guide was not completed in the time allotted for the initial interview. This opportunity for a second interview was used by Participant 2 who had extensive knowledge of the historical context and development of certain community dance classes within the city, lived experience teaching community dance programs, and mentoring other dance instructors, and therefore had rich knowledge to share throughout the interview process. Two interviews and one second interview with one participant were conducted by the first author, and three interviews were conducted by the second author. The semi-structured interview guide asked questions regarding PL (e.g., In what ways do you see PL affecting your students who are older adults?), dance (e.g., In what ways do you see dancing affect the older adults with whom you work?), social connection (e.g., Are opportunities to be active with other people, or ways in which dancing and social participation are combined, important to the older adults you work with?), and program/institutional considerations (e.g., Are there ways in which support for dance-related activity could be improved for the populations/in the programs you work with?). Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service, and the first and second authors reviewed the transcripts of the interviews they conducted for accuracy. Participants received a copy of their transcript as well as our initial analysis and were given the opportunity to share feedback in a follow-up interview. No participants chose to provide feedback.

Data analysis

Data storage and organization were assisted by NVivo 12 software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2018). Data were analysed using

Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) recommendations for reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis is well-aligned with the constructivist perspective as it highlights and values the researchers' knowledge about the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This analysis approach also allows participants to share their unique expertise on community-based dance programming for older adults while allowing the authors to generate themes that represent shared meaning across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Analysis was guided by the process outlined in the work of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). To become familiar with the data, the first and second authors began by reviewing the interview transcripts, paying particular attention to the transcripts of interviews they had conducted to ensure consistency between the interview and transcript. Initial coding was then conducted. All data extracts believed to contribute to the topic of interest and aligned with the research question were coded. Initial codes were then grouped to develop preliminary themes. All data extracts within the theme were reviewed to ensure that they contributed meaningfully to the theme. Data were reviewed by the author that conducted each respective interview, to consider if the themes accurately represented the data and that extracts relevant to the themes were coded. Themes were named, and results were presented using illustrative participant quotations and descriptions of the authors' interpretations of the meaning of each theme. Throughout the analysis process, the first and second authors met with the third and fifth authors who reviewed, questioned, and challenged analytic decisions. The first and second authors worked collaboratively. Any remaining questions or differences of opinion regarding analysis were discussed with the larger research team. All authors had the opportunity to review the analysis and provide feedback.

Quality criteria

To ensure rigour, quality criteria specific to reflexive thematic analysis were addressed. Braun and Clarke (2021) identify two overarching considerations: (1) adequate choice and explanation of methods and methodology, and (2) well-developed and justified analysis. The study aimed for coherence between research purpose, methodology, and analysis method. Semi-structured interviews were selected as they aligned with the study's purpose of examining various program experts' perspectives on community dance. Specifically, individual interviews allowed the researchers to hear various and potentially conflicting perspectives on the topic, aligning with the philosophical perspective of the study. Reflexive thematic analysis is also consistent with constructivist epistemology; both recognize the researchers as integral to the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell, 2013). Given this, it was important for the researchers to reflect on and disclose their positionality to the research. The first author is a White, able-bodied woman in her twenties. She holds her MSc in Kinesiology, is a dance educator, and had previously established professional relationships with two study participants. The second author holds an MSc in Kinesiology and has experience as a dance educator. She identifies as a White, able-bodied, cis-gender woman in her twenties. The third author is a White, cis-gendered, able-bodied university kinesiology faculty member in their forties whose research focuses on social relationships in exercise and sport, including dance, and had existing relationships with some participants of the study through previous research and collaborations. The fourth author is a PhD Candidate whose area of research focuses on the integration of dance science and social somatics in

dance pedagogy. She is a middle-aged, White, cis-gender woman with a disability. The fifth author is a former contemporary dancer and faculty member in the Faculties of Kinesiology and Dance, whose academic expertise is in dance science teaching and research. She identifies as a white, able-bodied, cis-gender woman in her forties who also had past professional and personal relationships with study participants.

The authors addressed the need for a well-developed and justified analysis by immersing themselves in the data. Initial coding occurred by the first and second authors working collaboratively, where analytic choices were discussed and reviewed until a decision was concluded. The third and fifth authors provided feedback and acted as critical friends (e.g., asking questions, posing alternative interpretations, and offering suggestions or modifications to consider) throughout the analysis, striving to develop themes that were meaningful and represented the participants' perspectives.

Results

Dancing is an activity that program experts saw as being beneficial to numerous aspects of one's life, with Participant 2 describing it as a 'super vitamin', suggesting that it is one activity that could support and contribute to numerous aspects of one's health. Several physical benefits offered by dancing were identified, including exposure to novel movement, the possibility for progression and mastery, and the development of physical competence and body awareness. Additional benefits of dance such as the potential to support mental acuity and offer opportunities for cultural expression, creativity and artistry, and to be inspired were also discussed. As Participant 1 described, 'dance is universal, it's cultural, it's physical, it's artistic, there's many elements there'.

Expert instructors tailor classes to participants' needs and interests

Creating experiences specifically designed for participants is an essential skill for dance instructors working with older adults: 'We have a demographic who has very unique considerations that are different from a younger adult population.... You want to tap into "what are those requirements?" "What are those needs?"' (P1). Creating programs that align with the needs and desires of older adult dancers requires an instructor to be attuned to the individuals in their class. Program experts suggest a participant-centred approach, where instructors actively strive to adapt and tailor the class for those who attend, is crucial in supporting motivation to attend the class.

[Dancing] is so diverse and so versatile that you can custom design programs ... listening, really attuning, paying attention to what is gonna really be a thriving program in this particular community that makes people every week show up because they can't wait to get there. (P2)

Participant 2 emphasized that dancing is a physical activity that is less hampered by rules and therefore allows instructors to steer the class in a way that best aligns with the participants' interests and desires. To understand participants' needs, interests, desires, and aspirations, program experts emphasized the importance of fostering social connections: 'Taking time also to check in with them and understand why they are in the program, what they need, what is challenging for them so that you have a little bit more of that interpersonal relationship that is going on' (P1). Similarly, program experts discussed how instructors must develop content that aligns

with participants' physical competencies. '[It is] up basically to the teacher to notice what [the class participants'] abilities are and to offer them alternatives, gentle alternatives to the movement' (P4). Program experts with experience as dance instructors stressed the importance of adapting to participants' needs, offering modifications, and providing encouragement to participants who may have lower confidence in their abilities. This may mean seeing what is happening in the moment and being able to adjust on the spot. Instructors can foster success and honour the abilities of older adults by providing modifications and various ways of performing movements.

Facilitating positive and welcoming classes, that 'build confidence to make people feel successes early on... right when they enter the room' (P5) was also highlighted by program experts. Supporting confidence is critical: 'especially with seniors, because sometimes they're nervous to try something because they don't believe in themselves. And I do believe in them' (P4). This program expert also discussed the importance of encouragement. 'I do believe in them.... it gets into their psyche that I believe in them and then they try' (P4). Instructors must also, 'make sure that the material is being delivered at a level that is always below the threatening threshold' (P2). Developing and designing classes that align with participants' skill levels and abilities offers opportunities for older adults to be successful and fosters confidence. Participant 5 emphasized that supporting participants' confidence may encourage ongoing participation in programming, even if they are experiencing decreasing physical competence due to aging or health concerns. Ongoing participation in physical activity programming may then minimize physical decline.

The importance of fostering an environment which supports participants' autonomy and allows participants to make choices that best align with their needs was discussed by some program experts. 'I think it serves everybody better if you can be quite diverse ... and offer lots of different options for the people inside of the structure' (P1). This program expert described how they offer: 'A steady stream of reminders to self-care, to take care of yourself, to be patient with yourself' (P1) in the classes they instruct. The need for a non-judgmental class culture established by the instructor was also stated. Creating an accepting dance environment allows older adults to engage in a positive dancing experience and minimizes embarrassment or reduced confidence.

The ability for instructors to tailor classes, prioritize participants' needs, and support participants' confidence while running a class that feels seamless requires a high level of mastery. Participant 2 emphasized the importance of a knowledgeable dance instructor:

You have a professional level of standard and that includes the training of the teacher, the level of training of the teacher that they're full-on total professional in their field, that you provide them [the dance participants] with a professional experience.

Quality instruction was identified as necessary, yet program experts discussed limited relevant training opportunities. Participants who instruct dance had learnt to do so for this population through mentorship with other teachers or through taking non-dance-specific trainings.

'There are a lot of teacher training [opportunities] for kids and teens and adults, but very little training, I would say that focuses on the older adult demographic' (P1). The lack of consideration of the older adult dancer in varied dance instructor training highlights how older adults continue to be excluded from varied dance contexts.

The heart of what draws us to dancing: authentic experience and social connection

Dance programming for older adults must facilitate authentic and meaningful learning opportunities where instructors 'treat them like they are beginner dancers that would show up to any professional environment and work with a professional' (P2). High-quality and contextually rich lessons that provide opportunities for older adults to develop their dancing are essential.

You just bring the realness of what dancing is... you go for it. You go for the feeling. You go for the heart. You go for the difficulty. You go for the authentic thing of it... You really try to go to the heart of what draws dancers to dancing. (P2)

Program experts emphasized that older adults should have access to the same high-quality dance programming available to other age groups, rejecting ageist assumptions that older adults are not capable, or that lessons need to be diluted down for this demographic: 'First of all, you have to treat them not like senior citizens or adults, you just treat them as people... I truly believe when I go into class that they can do it [laughs]' (P4). All people, including older adults, should be seen and respected as dancers when in a dance class. Participants also recognized how dance presented opportunities to be joyful and playful. For some older adults, dance may be an activity they have previously engaged in and have fond memories of. Regardless of past participation, dance offered older adults a reprieve from daily responsibilities and challenges: 'They just relax, they let their hair down. And, as I say it's like being kids again, they have fun. We're always giggling' (P4). Program experts saw dance as an opportunity where participants can be carefree and find joy in movement while in the presence of others.

Social connection was seen as an essential component of an enjoyable dancing experience. 'I think that any time people are adding physical activity classes or experiences into their life, it improves both their social and physical activity' (P5). Program experts identified how a positive social environment could encourage social participation. 'This little hub of this weekly dance class had the effect of creating familiarity with people who passed each other on the street in the same neighborhood I won't call them friendships, but knowing more neighbors in their community, right?' (P2). The social opportunities of the group class may result in new or deeper social connections, and contribute positively to older adults' social participation, and lessen experiences of isolation. Participant 2, who had experience instructing classes, discussed the empathetic connections they experienced: 'You felt your heart crack open. ... There's just this moment where everything really just kind of fades away and you're in this room with these people, and there is just this very sweet connection of our human-ness' (P2). She also discussed how dancing may be a feasible program for participants who do not share a common language, 'because you have so many other cues to go on'. Participant 2 believed that dancing offered older adults a 'somatic sensation of being in community'. These quotations emphasize how dance provides the opportunity to have a shared and empathic experience with others through movement. One program expert specifically discussed how she fostered opportunities for social connections, by pairing dancing with scheduled social and snack time. 'That was a big part of it... socializing after dancing and food went along with socializing. So, we had cookies and juice and this whole time of kind of fellowship' (P2). Food was not incidental to the program, but something this program expert saw as essential and therefore planned and budgeted.

Although the social opportunities of dancing were discussed as essential to the experience, participants also noted aspects of the group experience that were challenging to address or mitigate when offering classes. First, dance was described as exposing. 'You are very vulnerable... I'm just here. I've got my arms, my legs, that's it. You're kind of putting yourself out there' (P2). Participant 1 suggested that these feelings of vulnerability may be mitigated by minimizing the use of mirrors or dimming the lights. Participant 5 described that instructors may need to manage group dynamics to promote all participants being included:

You can bet a group of people who have been coming to the same dance class for 10 years and someone else comes in and they are not welcomed into the fold without a lot of perseverance... we're aware it happens and our instructors have tools that are supposed to help them try to break that down. (P5)

Program experts also noted that feelings of exclusion may be mitigated if participants had somebody accompany them when they initially joined. Participant 1 identified some classes allow for this. Participant 2 also suggested that programs could facilitate new participants having a partner who supports them in joining class initially to alleviate feelings of apprehension.

Elitist, ableist, and gendered assumptions of dance prevent social inclusion of older adults in dancing spaces

Participants discussed the many ways dance can be or is perceived as exclusionary:

So the lack of accessibility to dance, good dance training, continuous high-level dance training ... means that the only people who get any are people [who have the financial means to pay for private dance training]. You have a huge economic divide between people who could afford dance classes and people who couldn't afford dance classes. (P2)

Limited opportunities to access dance programming previously in life may result in older adults not feeling confident in their skills and abilities, and therefore being reluctant to engage in dance. Additionally, older adults may have previously felt excluded from dancing spaces, and these previous feelings of exclusion may prevent them from participating later in life. Such feelings of exclusion may still be experienced into older adulthood.

Stereotypes centred around the dancing body, gender-appropriate dancing, and ageist assumptions must also be confronted and dismantled to support older adult dance participation. 'There's an expectation that we have to look a certain way and move a certain way in order to be a good dancer, whatever that means...' (P1). They later explained, 'we have to release that idea that bodies need to be young, healthy, fit, flexible, strong in order to dance' (P1). This program expert also described that the built environments of dance spaces are not often inclusive of varied physical abilities: 'dance studios are not very well organized. Often those buildings, unless they've been built recently, and even recently... accessibility is an issue still for a lot of people'. Necessary built environment considerations noted by Participant 1 specifically mentioned 'hand railings to hang on to, a ramp inside to come up so you can either take a short staircase or, take a ramp up into the main hall. Wide doorways, an accessible bathroom, good lighting, you know, well-heated spaces'. One program expert spoke to the benefits of offering classes in dance-specific spaces: 'As much as possible, you replicate a kind of dance studio experience. So, your facility, you're not in a

gym if you can avoid it' (P2), implying that offering dance classes in a dance environment may offer a more authentic experience where the physical environment is designed for dance. On the other hand, another program expert suggested offering classes in a non-fitness-specific space may be beneficial, 'so maybe like a community hall might not be as intimidating as a community recreation center' (P3), indicating that older adults may not feel as welcome, comfortable, or invited into fitness or dance-specific spaces. These perspectives highlight the need not only to consider the physical accessibility of spaces with the potential to host older adult dance programming but also to consider if those spaces are welcoming and socially inclusive of this population.

Program experts also discussed what they perceived older adults to believe about the gender-appropriateness of dance. Promoting and supporting dance as an inclusive activity for all older adults, rather than only those who identify as women, was something program experts were navigating. Facilitating partnered dancing specifically was a point of contention: 'So we use language like lead and follow, rather than, a male position [and] female position'. Participant 5 explained that they use this language to be inclusive to all participants of the dance class, and to affirm that partnered dance can be among any two people, but explained not everyone was always supportive or accepting of such language: 'But we also do run into, maybe sometimes a little less accepting audience too' (P5). Navigating older adults' gendered expectations of dancing was identified as particularly challenging by one program expert. Participant 4 discussed that even in non-partnered classes, 'if, a gentleman was wanting to be in a tap class and just the same as with kids, they've been ribbed for [it]'. Unfortunately, it appears gendered assumptions about who should (or shouldn't dance) persists across ages.

Dance programs that welcome those of various abilities, ages, and health considerations are necessary so that older adults have sufficient opportunities to participate in dance and experience social inclusion within dance environments. Program experts identified a need for more visible opportunities for older adults to dance in a non-elite setting where 'people have a place to express themselves, to be physically active' (P5). One participant suggested programming inclusive of various ages, promoting intergenerational interactions:

If there is a dance or a social event or something, they don't give the advertising to include seniors. They talk about... stuff that appeals to the younger adult usually... So we need more of that kind of atmosphere where it's not, you know, excluding. (P4)

Another program expert discussed the need for more programming addressing specific health conditions or ability levels, 'there are classes designed for some focus[ed] groups addressing particular medical changes, medical conditions and needs, but ... it needs to grow. There should be a lot more available' (P1). This program expert highlighted that older adult-specific programming offers opportunities to better tailor class content and may support older adults to feel more comfortable surrounded by others of a similar age. Program experts had differing perspectives on the type or programming that is needed to encourage older adult dance participation. Regardless of opinion about the type of programming that was best, experts agreed that more programming opportunities that welcome older adult dance participation are needed. Interestingly, dance may offer an opportunity to challenge negative aging narratives: 'breaking that stereotype, 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks' ... Shifting out of judgment,

perhaps, or self-limiting beliefs about what you think your body can do [or] what you've been told your body can do (P1)'. Older adult community dance presents the opportunity to dismantle stereotypes and assumptions about aging, supporting respect and social inclusion for older adults.

Collaboration across sectors is needed to offer accessible, sustainable, and valued dance programming

Supporting community dance requires collaboration across disciplines; however, program experts were clear that allowing dance experts to design the actual dancing experience is vital: 'Once the door closes and the people are in the room and the one-hour class is gonna start, that's what we're [the dance expert] taking care of' (P2). Instructors can then collaborate with organizations to host, optimize, and promote the class to support older adults' participation. As one program expert put it, 'so they are the dance experts and I'm the older adult expert, and we work together' (P5). Dance artists must be empowered and acknowledged for their expertise and given the opportunity to create and deliver content they see as aligned with participants' interests while having organizational support.

Older adults' dance participation is not only influenced by factors within the studio walls. Program experts identified that challenges related to the cost of programming, communication and information sharing, program availability, and transportation/proximity of classes all influence whether older adults can attend or access community dance programs. Programming connected to larger organizations or communities that work with older adults or are engaged in age-friendly initiatives may be best equipped to offer support to overcome these logistical considerations. One program expert discussed how a program they were involved in partnered with a local organization supporting older adults and a municipal social worker. This collaboration allowed individuals to work in a team where they were able to share their respective expertise:

I think the best partnership[s] are being able to identify the right group of people, bring that group of people to the table, and then figure out what is their strengths, what's their skillset, and letting that group do what they do best. (P2)

A non-dance program expert felt unsure about where to refer older adults interested in dance programming, highlighting the need to build stronger connections among dance organizations and organizations that specialize in working with older adults. 'I think that a collaborative approach is really important and helps you... communicate with your target audience' (P3). This illuminates how program experts who are not directly involved in the dance community often have limited knowledge or connection to the few niche opportunities for community dance available to older adults. Program experts also identified how they faced challenges related to providing information to older adults effectively, particularly those not currently engaged in other programming. Collaboration among organizations may also increase the reach of programs as different organizations may have previously established communication channels. Collaboration across organizations may also facilitate accessing spaces to host dance programs; one program expert identified how they were able to partner with a dance studio that offered the space without a fee, as the dance studio usually was available at the time of the class. The Age-Friendly Cities Guide (WHO, 2007) recognizes the importance of transportation in

facilitating social participation and older adults accessing and attending programming, but dance programs may not have the resources or abilities to combat these barriers without working collaboratively.

Program experts developing or supporting community dance programs should also actively engage older adult program participants to take on leadership roles within programs. Participant 2 explained one program she had created; ‘they did the advertising, the church took [that] on... volunteers from the church came to open the building, before we knew it, nobody even asked – suddenly the coffee pot was on’. Engaging older adults as leaders within the program allows their knowledge and expertise to be utilized and can support program sustainability: ‘I think they just can’t imagine Wednesday morning at that church without the dance program. It’s just normal. And they know what they need to do to keep it going’ (P2). Older adult participants being actively involved in the decision making of programming supports civic and social participation, and program sustainability.

One program expert discussed the need to share the benefits of dancing with health services. PL acknowledges that individuals having knowledge and understanding about activities that promote health supports their PL (Whitehead, 2010). Medical doctors in particular could be a useful resource for recommending dancing, or considering how dance could be used as a method of health promotion:

Dancing should be a basic part of what public health offers us... I guess I’m suggesting our tax dollars should support access to programs that we know have tremendous health benefits... I’m saying dancing is a very affordable public health measure that could potentially impact a lot of people. (P2)

Connecting with older adult organizations and health services may allow information about older adult dance programs to be shared more widely.

Discussion

This research is one part of a larger project which aimed to gain greater insight on the experiences, benefits, and instruction of community dance for older adults, through a variety of perspectives (Magrath et al., 2022; Paglione et al., 2023, 2024). The current manuscript aimed specifically to understand program experts’ perspectives on the role that community dance can play in promoting PL in older adults and contribute to age-friendly initiatives. Program experts felt dance programs for older adults show potential for supporting aging well, particularly when classes are led by knowledgeable instructors who offer meaningful, rich, and engaging dance experiences. However, program experts also believed that older adults may not always feel welcomed into dance opportunities due to assumptions and stereotypes about who should dance. Programs are more likely to be successful when they are connected to and supported by community organizations, and designed to address barriers to program participation. Well-supported, high-quality community dance programs have the potential to encourage PL and contribute to age-friendly environments when intentionally designed to be inclusive and are developed in collaboration with those who have expertise working with older adults. This includes engaging older adult class participants.

Quality community dance programs for older adults are led by dance professionals who understand the specific needs of the population. Studies confirm that older adults reap positive health and

well-being benefits from the arts when they are conducted by professional teaching artists (Cohen et al., 2006; Lifetime Arts, 2020). The program experts of the current study described the importance of instructors being experienced and proficient in dance facilitation. The Age-Friendly Cities Guide (WHO, 2007) identifies the importance of skilled and knowledgeable facilitators in the promotion of age-friendly community services, yet participants of our study described how they felt there were limited training opportunities for dance instructors to learn best practices for working with older adults in a dance setting. This lack of professional training opportunities exists despite calls as far back as 1999 identifying both a lack of, and urgent need for, training opportunities in which dance instructors learn how to work with older people (e.g., Frances, 1999; People Dancing, 2016). Although there are some training opportunities available in Canada (e.g., the Royal Academy of Dance’s (2023) Silver Swans training and opportunities through Canada’s National Ballet School (2022)), participants’ lack of acknowledgment of these opportunities may indicate that these training are not accessible, not aligned to their teaching approach, or that information about these trainings does not always reach the intended audience. The current study identified perceptions and assumptions that may lead to exclusionary beliefs that dance is not for older adults. Limited programs exist, and resources dedicated to older adult community dance programs are inadequate. These factors may contribute to the lack of training opportunities. Importantly, the absence of instructor training opportunities for older adult dance may then result in limited dance opportunities; these circumstances contribute to one another and highlight the complexity of developing and implementing training and programming. Canada’s National Ballet School suggests that training for dance instructors can support capacity building and increases opportunities for older adult to access community dance programming (Bar & Dalrymple, 2023). Adaptable content and instruction can also enable dancers to safely enhance physical competence, therefore positively contributing to their PL (Whitehead, 2010). Instructors who recognize older adults’ individual abilities and have the skills and knowledge to adapt class content to their abilities can support participants’ confidence (Whitehead, 2019). Thus, dance training opportunities that clearly outline what activities and content are appropriate for, and how to work with the older adult population using a range of facilitation and instruction methods is needed.

Older adult community dance programming also offers the opportunity to challenge ageist beliefs and dismantle exclusionary assumptions of dancing. Program experts in the current study emphasized how dance programs can be adapted to participants’ varied needs, abilities, and interests. This assertion is in contrast to the common assumption that is pervasive in dance generally – that dance is for young, able-bodied girls and women (Doolittle & Flynn, 2004; Risner, 2014). These gendered and ableist assumptions of dancing unfortunately also influence assumptions about who can and should attend older adult dance programs. People Dancing (2022) is rooted in the belief that ‘everybody has the capacity to dance, express themselves and make meaning through dance’. Community dance, therefore, offers an avenue to challenge stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination related to age and aging, including self-directed ageism, which is crucial to age-friendly initiatives (WHO, 2007). Importantly, one program expert explained that dancing itself can help older adults question embodied ageist narratives as they discover that they can indeed learn new things and do more than they had initially expected they could. Feeling capable and confident in one’s skills and abilities supports continued engagement in physical activity (Whitehead, 2010). Past

research exploring community dance for older adults living with dementia identified dance's potential to challenge the stigma associated with the condition and promote social inclusion, a key consideration for age-friendly cities (Kontos *et al.*, 2021; WHO, 2007). Furthermore, challenging heteronormative, gender binary, Eurocentric, and ableist ideologies that prevent some from trying or feeling safe and comfortable in dance programs is important to ensuring dancer health and wellness and prolonging dance participation (Downie, 2022). Program experts in the current study recognized how dancing offers an inclusive movement opportunity while also recognizing that societal assumptions do not always align with their views. As such, community dance programming must be intentionally designed and advertised as an inclusive and welcoming practice where diversity and varied abilities are welcomed and celebrated.

Connecting dance programs to larger organizations, community initiatives, and health services were cited by program experts as potential ways to support civic participation among those who engage in the dance program, and thus expand the reach and size of dance programs. Recent literature has identified the necessity for and benefits of collaboration across sectors when developing age-friendly initiatives or research projects/programs for older adults (Rémillard-Boilard *et al.*, 2021; Skinner & Bar, 2023). Our research furthers this knowledge, suggesting that collaboration across sectors may allow community dance programs to be implemented in contexts that minimize logistical barriers for participants to access programming. Community collaborations have the potential to facilitate older adults learning about, accessing, and attending dance programs. The possibilities offered by a closer link between dance and health care providers (e.g., family doctors) were also raised by program experts, supporting the growing appetite in the dance community to establish connections with professionals across the health sector (e.g., Fortin, 2018; People Dancing, 2016). However, Bowman and Lim (2022) caution against the medicalization of activities, such as dance, recognizing that such experiences can offer great value without taking a therapeutic approach. Ongoing collaboration across the private sector, civil society, and all levels of government is integral to PL, healthy aging, and age-friendly environments (Buffel *et al.*, 2018; Jones *et al.*, 2018; WHO, 2015, 2020). Aspects of dance programs can also be championed by older adult participants. This opportunity for leadership by older adults recognizes the expertise and knowledge older adults have, and positively contributes to their inclusion and provides opportunities for civic participation (WHO, 2007). Working collaboratively with older adults can also promote program sustainability, an essential consideration in age-friendly programming (WHO, 2018). Older adult community dance classes should be created through collaboration and partnerships with organizations that have expertise in older adult programming, as well as older adult participants who can support long-lasting programming.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

This study explores program experts' perspectives on the benefits of community dance for older adults and explores how to best implement programs. Our conceptual framework and study design allowed this research to examine community dance from an ecological and holistic perspective. Considering multiple perspectives of individuals with diverse professional backgrounds allowed for thorough understanding and consideration of program design through various contexts and areas of expertise. Age-friendly

initiatives specifically look at how municipalities and policy makers can support older adults (WHO, 2007, 2018). Comparatively, PL focuses on the individuality of physical activity experiences (Whitehead, 2010). Together, this conceptual framework allowed for the examination of multiple levels of influence on community dance programming for older adults while recognizing the individual experiences of those who participate in such programming. Moreover, the current study answers recent calls for research considering PL in older adults (Edwards *et al.*, 2018) and age-friendly informed program development and implementation (Rémillard-Boilard *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the interdisciplinary research team was comprised of those with expertise in qualitative methodology, dance science, exercise psychology, and dance pedagogy, strengthening the interpretation of the data. One limitation of this study was that all participants were recruited from one city that had an Age-Friendly Cities strategy in place for several years prior to the study, and may therefore have been exposed to those ideas through their work. Recruitment and interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given this, community experts had likely spent some time away from supporting or leading in-person older adult programming. Experiences of the pandemic may have also influenced their responses regarding barriers to programs. Although the research team strived to include experts with diverse yet intersecting professional experience related to older adult community dance, it is important to acknowledge that this study only includes the perspective of five individuals who were all recruited from one city. Future research should work to include a greater variety of perspectives, engaging community experts from across Canada to offer a national perspective on the topic. Additionally, research should also explore the use of the term community dance within Canada, and if this shapes or influences the design and implementation of programming. Lastly, demographic information for community experts was not collected beyond age and gender, limiting the authors' abilities to more comprehensively describe the sample.

Dance offers both a creative and physical experience, and as such, future research should consider how to integrate arts-based frameworks. For example, creative aging, which focuses on older adults developing mastery in skills and social connection/community through meaningful, dedicated, and progressive art programming led by a professional, could be considered (Lifetime Arts, 2020). In addition, more should be known about who attends dance programs for older adults and how diversity and inclusion can be furthered. There should be greater efforts made to increase awareness among community programmers and policy makers about how dance benefits older people. Understanding the benefits may increase the priority of program and training development.

Conclusion

This study adds to a growing body of literature on community dance for older adults. A clear need for older adult-specific dance training was identified. Moreover, this research provides recommendations for designing, implementing, and instructing quality dance programs for older adults.

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