



Queensland
Ballet

Ballet Moves for Adult Creative Health

Stage One — Research Report

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Introduction

Due to its strong commitment to arts and health practice, Queensland Ballet (QB) initiated *Ballet Moves for Adult Creative Health*, a multi-stage project to investigate, develop, and disseminate evidence-based practice findings related to the delivery of ballet to active older adults.¹ Stage One involved a research project in partnership with Queensland University of Technology and supported by the Queensland Government's Advance Queensland initiative, which critically investigated older adults' motivations to participate in ballet, the health and wellbeing outcomes for active older adults, and the examination of the teaching practices involved in this delivery. This report outlines a summary of the findings pertaining to motivations to participate and wellbeing outcomes as perceived by active older adult class participants.

Background

Queensland Ballet's (QB) work in arts and health began in 2011 with the launch of *Dance Classes*, a community program that invited the public into the Company's studios at the Thomas Dixon Centre to participate in ballet, contemporary dance, and Pilates classes (Queensland Ballet, 2012, p. 22). This program grew to 14 different dance and fitness styles and participation of 14,770 in 2016 (Queensland Ballet, 2017a, p. 30), with *Dance Classes* being promoted as an activity to encourage the public to "embrace good health" (Queensland Ballet, 2016, p. 11), particularly physical health and social stimulation. In 2013, QB expanded its community engagement focus to directly target older adults. First was the introduction of the QB *Dance for Parkinson's* pilot program and accompanying research which reported positive findings, thus supporting *Dance for Parkinson's* as a positive contribution to participants' physical, emotional, social, and cognitive health.² After a successful pilot program, *Dance for Parkinson's* was scheduled as a regular component of the *Dance Classes* program. Following this, the *Seniors in Studio* stream of the *Dance Classes* program was launched, including *Tai Chi*, *Ballet for Seniors*, *Zumba Gold*, and *Dance for Parkinson's*. Central to this current research was *Ballet for Seniors*, a gentle class that was "especially tailored for Seniors, with a focus on improving poise, core strength, memory and mobility" (Queensland Ballet, 2017b). *Ballet for Seniors* was examined as a case study of a ballet class specifically designed for active older adults.

¹ The term 'active older adult' is used to refer to an older person who continues to have good physical and cognitive functioning, with the ability to participate in dance classes independently. This research is careful to avoid placing a chronological age on what constitutes an 'older adult', as people outside of a set scope may also identify as an older adult. The active older adult participants in this research were 46 to 82 years of age.

Research methods

Wellbeing questionnaire

To measure the perceived wellbeing outcomes of ballet participation, 10 *Ballet for Seniors* class participants took part in a wellbeing questionnaire at the beginning and end of a three-month data collection period, where existing teaching practice was studied and then modified by *Ballet for Seniors* teachers through a researcher-facilitated process. The questionnaire was completed pre- (July 2017) and post- (October 2017) the modification in teaching, with the intention to capture the impact of these teaching modifications. The questionnaire tool was structured so that participants reported the degree to which they 'Agreed' or 'Disagreed' with 27 statements pertaining to *Ballet for Seniors'* impact on their wellbeing across six categories: overall wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, social wellbeing, physical wellbeing, self-esteem, and coping strategies.³

Focus group

The same 10 participants also took part in focus groups pre- (July 2017) and post- (October 2017) the modification in teaching. These focus groups were scheduled immediately following *Ballet for Seniors* classes. The intent of the focus groups was to develop a deeper understanding of participant perspectives and experiences of ballet participation, and to begin to examine how elements of ballet class context, content, and pedagogy contributed to wellbeing outcomes; specifically emotional and social wellbeing. A semi-structured approach was utilised within the moderation of the focus groups, with the resulting data undergoing transcription and thematic analysis.

Observation

During the three-month data collection period, 10 *Ballet for Seniors* classes were observed by a researcher to develop understanding of how the classes operated. This contextualised the participants' comments and opened tacit understanding of the class context, content, and pedagogy.

² While Parkinson's Disease is not limited to older adults, it is typically associated with older age. This mixed methods research was in partnership with Queensland University of Technology and the University of Queensland. See the Jeffrey et al. (2014) for a summary of the research findings.

³ The questionnaire's design was based on Quiroga Mucia et al.'s (2010) survey of perceived benefit of dancing on wellbeing.



Key findings

Motivations to participate in ballet

- **Social interaction** was a key motivator for active older adults for ballet participation and contributed to the enjoyment of ballet classes. Being part of a group of people of similar age meant that class participants felt that they could relate to each other, making ballet participation more emotionally comfortable and pleasurable.
- For some class participants, **a love of ballet** also played a significant role in their motivation, and these tended to be people who had danced when they were young girls and women.
- **Accessibility** was raised by some participants as a deciding factor for participation, and *Ballet for Seniors* was identified as a program that they could fully participate in given its deliberate intent to target active older adults.

Perceived wellbeing outcomes of ballet participation

- Participating in ballet classes **led to positive wellbeing outcomes** as perceived by the participants, particularly: feeling more energetic/animated, keeping in shape, bodily control/awareness, posture, flexibility, physical wellbeing, and overall wellbeing.
- Challenging movements and sequences led to **an increased sense of achievement and happiness**, suggesting that rising to challenges is more pleasurable than working at an already achievable level.

Significance of the project

While varying genres of dance have previously been subject to empirical research to ascertain impact on older adult wellbeing,⁴ ballet has received very little attention. However, with dedicated ballet classes for active older adult participants becoming increasingly common, this research was a timely project to investigate motivations to participate in ballet and the outcomes that were experienced.⁵

⁴ Physical outcomes have been subject to most empirical research. A systematic review concluded that dance participation was connected to improvements in 60 to 90% of measurements in the categories of flexibility, muscular strength and endurance, balance, and cardiovascular endurance (Hwang & Braun, 2015). Other research has reported positive results for attention, concentration, intelligence (Kattenstroth et al., 2010; 2011; 2013), memory (Kattenstroth et al., 2013), and motor-cognitive dual-task performance (Hamacher et al., 2015), enhanced mood, (Eyigor et al., 2009; Hui et al., 2009; Lynch & Alexander, 2016; Wakeling, Etlin-Stein & Okazaki, c2015), emotional expression (Quiroga Murcia et al., 2010), emotional pleasure (Skinner, 2013), temporarily lifting anxiety (Gouvêa, Antunes, Bortolozzi, Marques, & Bertolini, 2017), a sense of accomplishment (Brown, McGuire, & Voelkl, 2008),

relaxation (Wakeling, Etlin-Stein, & Okazaki, c2015), forgetting worries and problems, cope with stressful situations, self-esteem (Quiroga Murcia et al., 2010), feeling socially included (Showumni, 2013), developing new friendships and acquaintances (Quiroga Murcia et al., 2010), quality of life (Costello et al., 2017; Holmes, 215; Horne, 2016; Shanahan et al., 2016), and life satisfaction (Cruz-Ferreira, 2015; Osgood, Smith Meyers, & Orchowky, 1990).

⁵ Desk research undertaken to identify ballet classes targeted for active older adults identified 27 programs across Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and the Netherlands. Many of these programs appeared to be relatively new (i.e., commencing in the past five years).

Findings

Motivations to participate in ballet

Emotional and social elements emerged as the most common motivating factors across the class participants. A love of ballet was reported to be connected to some of the participants' previous ballet experience as young girls and women; in this way attending *Ballet for Seniors* marked a return to dancing. Other participants spoke about *Ballet for Seniors* being their introduction to ballet participation, but reported having wanted to dance when they were younger:

I used to dream when I was little. [...] I was only little and [my parents] knew that I loved ballet. And I used to dance around our house on my toes, but my toes were [tucked] under thinking I was the ballerina doing all this. [...] I think, "If I was born today, now that I've come to ballet, it seems that maybe that's what I would like to be." (Susan,⁶ *Ballet for Seniors* participant)

For Susan, participating in ballet classes fulfilled a childhood dream and had deep emotional significance for her. Loving the artform of ballet, whether the person had previous experience or not, was a motivating factor for most of the class participants, but not all.

Social interaction, particularly with people that were seen to be like oneself, also motivated participants to attend classes. Feeling like they could relate to the other participants, to feel a sense of sameness was reported as a significant factor when first deciding to try ballet. For example:

[...] when I looked at the girls who were in the other [general adult ballet] class, I kind of went, "Mm," you know, they're kind of in the younger age bracket. And for me, as someone who's approaching menopause and starting to go through that, I feel much more comfortable in a group of older women where I don't have to worry about whether I can do something. (Julie, *Ballet for Seniors* participant)

I do enjoy being with people more my own age because then you just feel more comfortable. (Helen, *Ballet for Seniors* participant)

Furthermore, some participants commented that their fellow participants, particularly the more senior of the group, also contributed to their ongoing motivation and "inspiration" for ballet participation. Socialisation around and away from classes was also reported as a motivating factor to attend classes: to continue being part of the *Ballet for Seniors* community. Social interaction was largely participant-led; for example, some participants would often go for coffee together after class and organised social gatherings that operated in isolation of the program, such as a 'Christmas in July' lunch. In this way the social elements of ballet participation, of which some extended beyond the class itself, motivated participants to try the class in the first instance, and encouraged participants to keep coming back to keep connecting with this group of people.

Physical exercise was also commonly reported as a motivation, however it was not discussed with the same enthusiasm or to the same extent as the emotional and social motivators, suggesting that while exercise might have been considered a reason to attend ballet classes, it was not the central motivator. Mental stimulation and having 'me time' were also reported as motivators for a few participants.

While not a motivation to attend ballet classes, accessibility (i.e., the ability for a class to accommodate physical limitations) was discussed as an important factor for some participants in deciding whether to try ballet in the first instance. For example, Helen spoke about being frustrated that her fitness level was not accommodated in other exercise offerings, while Christine explained that other adult ballet classes she had previously tried were populated by predominately young adults and were pitched at a level that was too challenging for her. As a dedicated class for active older adults, *Ballet for Seniors* was considered more accessible to the requirements of ageing bodies and minds.

⁶ For anonymity, the names of class participants that appear in this report are pseudonyms.



Perceived wellbeing outcomes

The perceived wellbeing outcomes of ballet participation were generally very positive. The highest average scoring elements (i.e., averaging 4.5 or above out of 5 across both questionnaires)⁷ were: feeling more energetic/animated, keeping in shape, bodily control/awareness, posture, flexibility, and general physical wellbeing. When compared, the pre- and post-test questionnaire scores (see Figures 1 to 6) indicated that the modifications to teaching practice were not successful in achieving greater perceived wellbeing outcomes as the post-test scores were generally lower.⁸ However, the participants did report a clear preference for the modified class, which received an average preference score of 4.63 out of 5 (SD=0.70). The reasons offered by participants for this preference included:

- greater continuity between classes,
- more challenging class content,
- more 'up-beat' and fun movements,
- the teachers appeared to be more aware of the varying levels of ability across class participants,
- the teachers were more enthusiastic,
- the teachers provided more technical information,
- the class was led at a faster pace,
- the teachers were more professional in their approach, and
- that the program generally offered a little more of "all the things I [Elizabeth] come for."

⁷ Responses were assigned a numerical value, where 'Strongly disagree'=1, 'Disagree'=2, 'Neutral'=3, 'Agree'=4 and 'Strongly Agree'=5.

⁸ Possible contributing factors to lower scores in the post-test wellbeing questionnaire included: participant attrition (i.e., all 10 participants completed the pre-test questionnaire, while only eight completed the post-test questionnaire); unintentional encouragement for the participants to think more critically in the post-test questionnaire due to the focus group discussions; and the trial being a very short, seven-week period which may have not been enough time for participants to feel effects of the modified framework.

Figure 1: Overall wellbeing responses

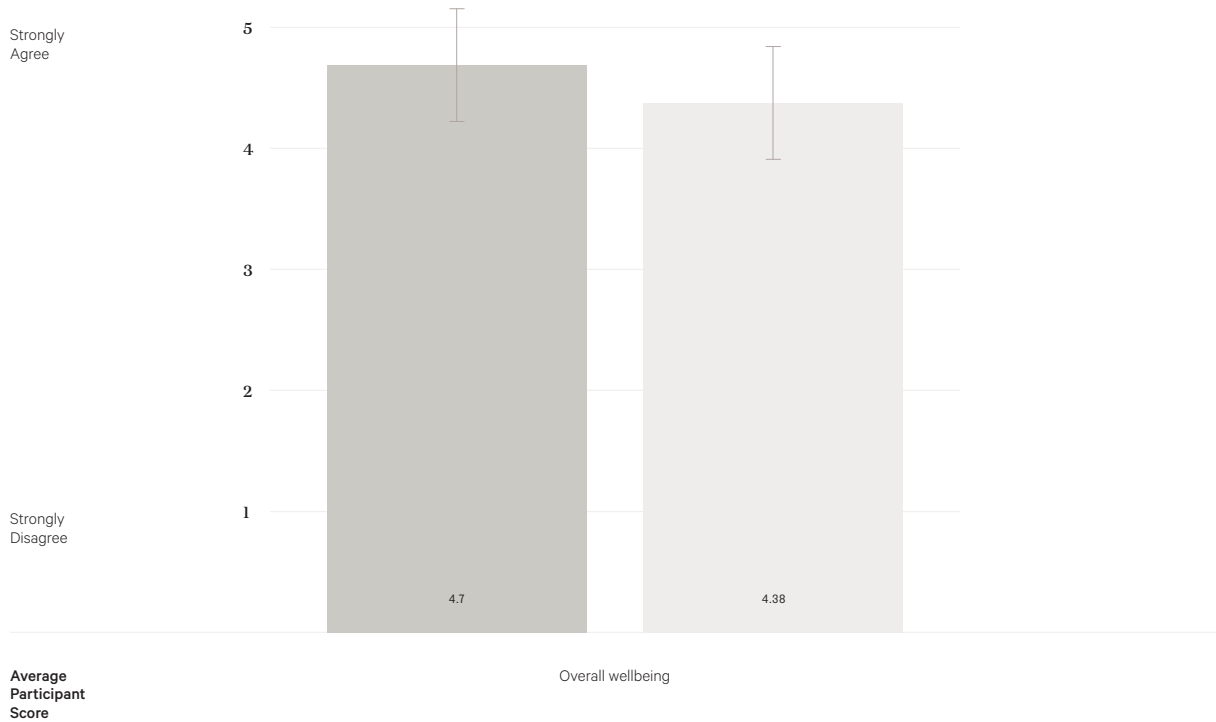
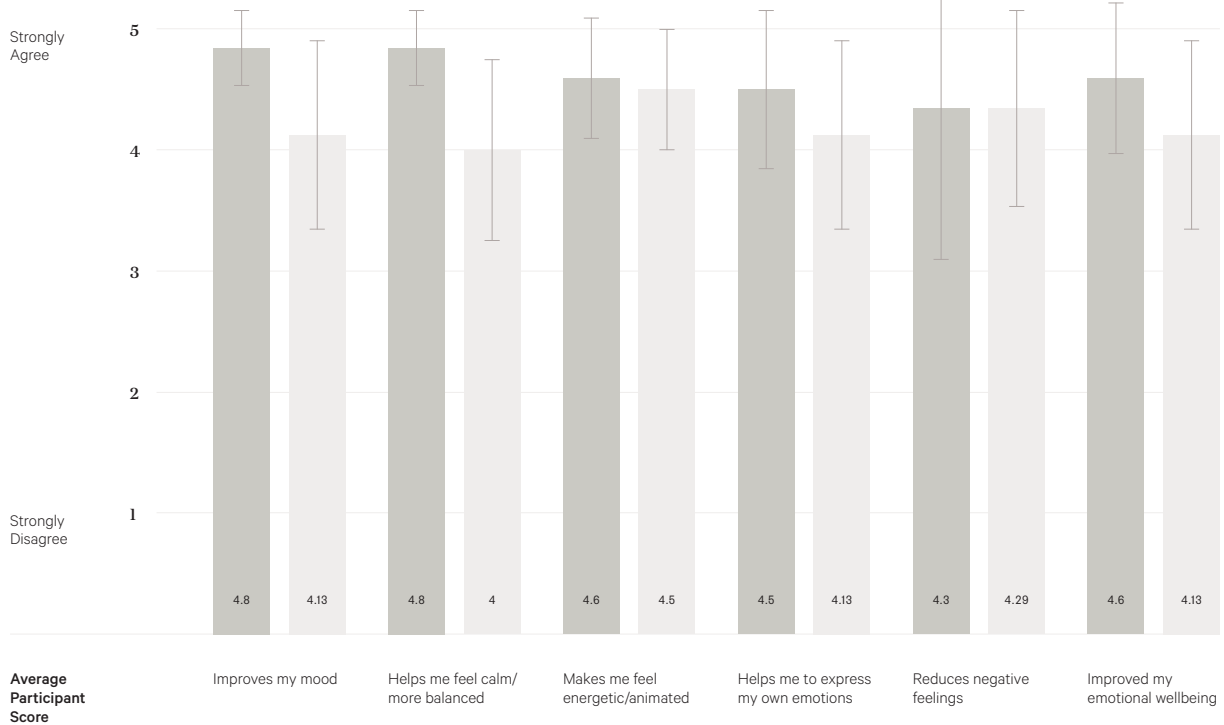


Figure 2: Emotional wellbeing responses



Pre-test
 Post-test

Figure 3: Social wellbeing responses

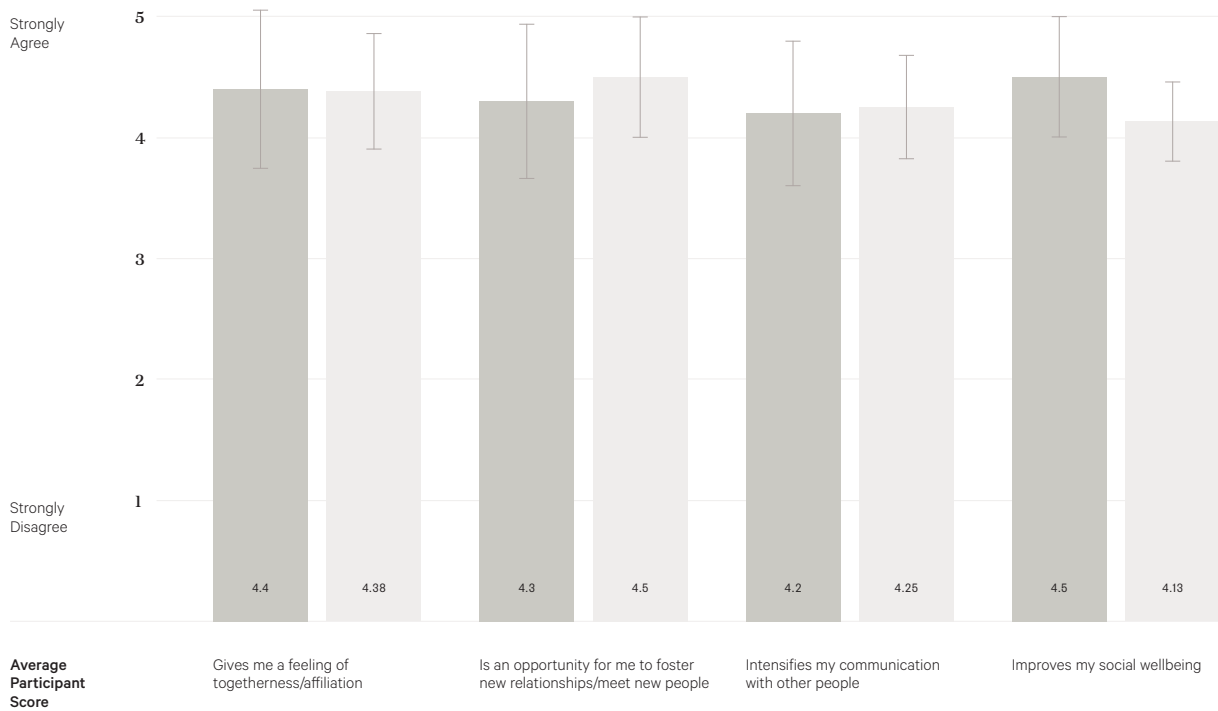
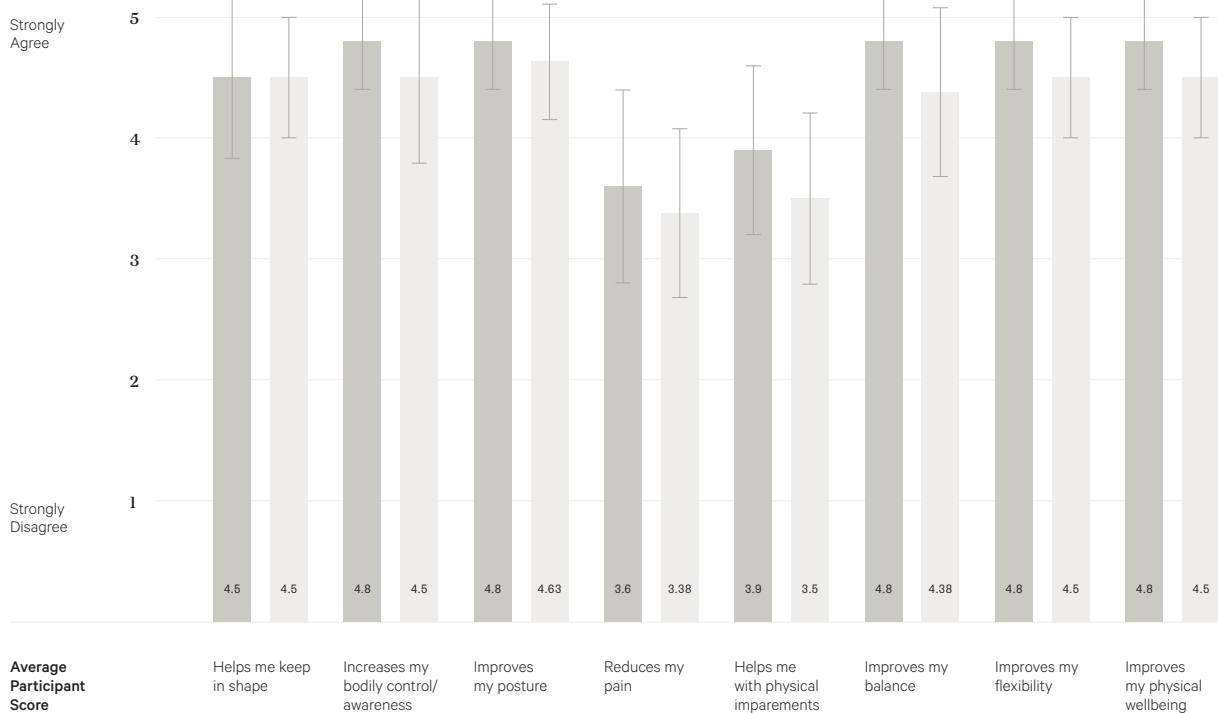


Figure 4: Physical wellbeing responses



Pre-test Post-test

Figure 5: Self-esteem responses

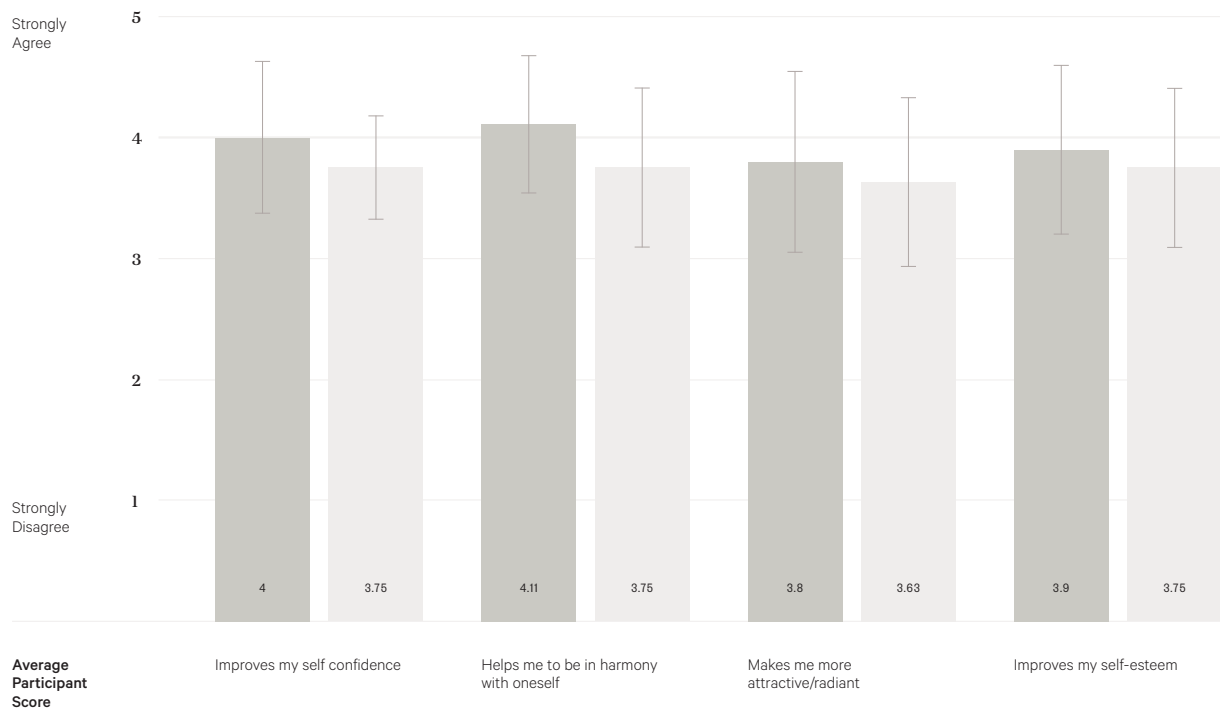
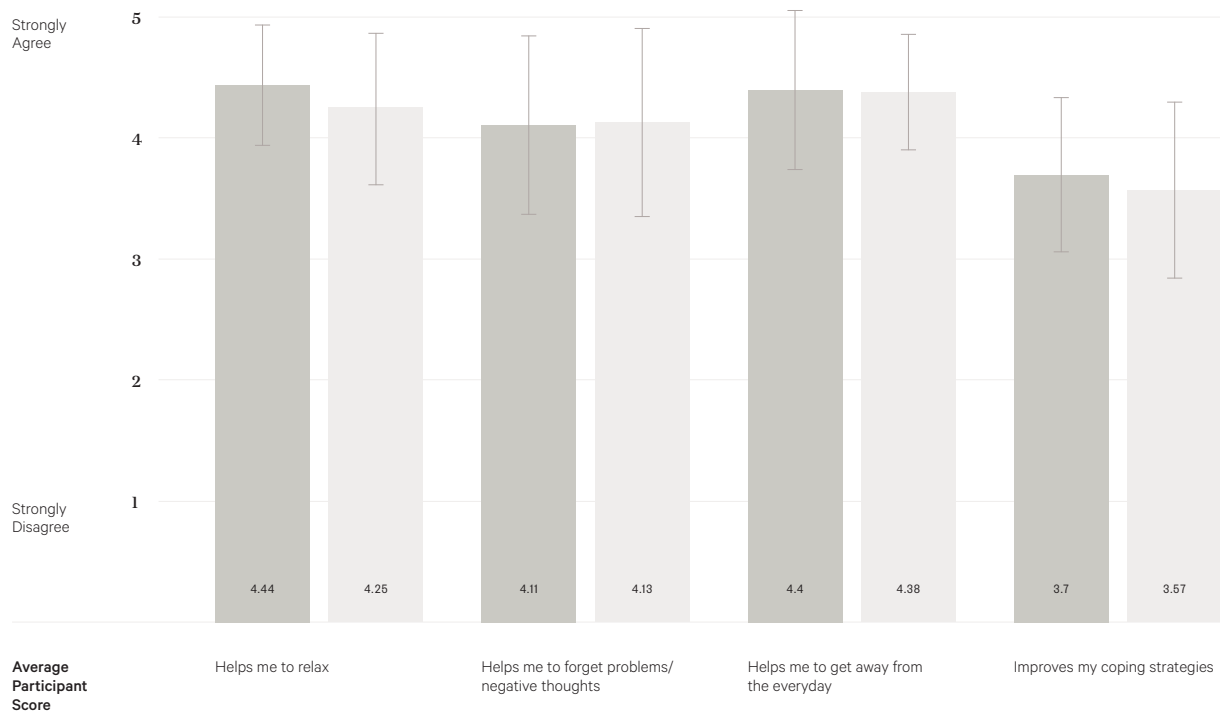


Figure 6: Coping strategies responses



Pre-test
 Post-test



Social experience of ballet participation

Participant descriptions of ballet participation indicated a sense of togetherness, community, and friendship-building. When referring to an exercise where the whole class travelled forward performing waltz movements, Margaret expressed that “it’s a lovely unison of energy in the room”, highlighting a feeling of connectedness among participants.

Community was particularly emphasised by participant interactions in response to the movements and exercises given by the teachers. Participants were observed to have regularly exchanged comments with people beside them during classes, one pair of participants consistently swapped places at the barre when changing directions, and on one occasion two participants held hands while performing choreography that did not include partner work. The participants explained these interactions as a culture of assisting each other with achieving movements and sequences. For example, class participant Sharon often helped her to identify the correct working leg:

Well, I always use the wrong leg. Always. I do. But [Sharon] just, very quietly, walks up and says, “Use your outside leg,” and [I say], “Thank you.” So I go again and I’ve got the wrong [leg] again, and she goes, “Outside leg.” *Laughs*. Not in a way that’s, “You’re wrong,” or anything. [...] And no sort of bossiness about it either. [...] I enjoy it because that’s why I’m here. Not only because of everything else, but because I want to learn, too. I don’t want to have two left feet all the time. You know, I want to have a try. [...] At least somebody’s trying to correct me in a very nice way. I think it’s good. (Susan, *Ballet for Seniors* participant)

The social experiences among participants incorporated elements of togetherness; community in, around, and away from classes; and the development of friendships. For the most part, these social experiences were participant-led, suggesting that the ballet class operated as a meeting place in the first instance, and then as a weekly touch point for supportive social engagement.



The assistance from fellow participants was well-received and welcomed because there was “no competitiveness” (Christine, *Ballet for Seniors* participant), “no judgements” (Robyn, *Ballet for Seniors* participant) and no “bossiness” (Susan, *Ballet for Seniors* participant) in how they helped each other. Furthermore, Lynette reported that she enjoyed being able to aid others: “You know I love the fact that the gorgeous little lady that always stands beside me will say, ‘Help me. I don’t know what we’re doing. Help me.’” Helping each other emerged as an element of the class culture that operated independently of the teacher and that was pleasurable for those giving and receiving assistance.

The community appeared to extend beyond ballet classes, to a post-class coffee ritual, and organised events that were away from ballet altogether. Anne explained that “[they] don’t have that much time to be social” during classes, therefore most typical social interactions (e.g., ‘catching-up’) operated pre-class, post-class, and away from class activities. Credit was given to one class participant who took the initiative to act as a catalyst for such social “traditions”. Due to regularly attending ballet classes and partaking in these social traditions, participants developed new enjoyable

acquaintances, even close and caring friendships for some, as they felt like they had been “get[ting] to know people better” (Christine, *Ballet for Seniors* participants): “I think we’ve all become very close and friendly, and it’s lovely. It’s something to look forward to” (Lynette, *Ballet for Seniors* participants). Generally, these closer friendships were attributed to continuing interactions with each other over time, as opposed to ballet participation:

I think when you go on a regular basis you get to see the same people each time, and people start to get to know your name, they get to know your face, and we go to coffee afterwards, you know, from time to time. And I think that way you get to know people and you start to form, like, friendships, and people come up to you, “How are you,” and they noticed when you’re not there on particular weeks.

(Julie, *Ballet for Seniors* participant)



The role of the teacher within social experiences of ballet participation was also examined, with the relationship being described as one of mutual respect from both teacher and participant perspectives. *Ballet for Seniors* teacher Tamara Zurvas described her relationship with the participants as being distinct from other classes that she teaches, in that “it feels quite equal”. Furthermore, Zurvas and fellow *Ballet for Seniors* teacher Melissa Tattam both described how their relationships with these older adult participants were more personal than other groups:

[...] it is a group that you develop, I guess, closer relationships with than most classes, just for the feeling of the environment and also because they're so invested in you, like, they really want to know about you and your life (Zurvas, *Ballet for Seniors* teacher).

I try to keep it professional, obviously, but sometimes it does sort of become a bit personal when they ask to see photos of my son [...] And I think they like that more personal relationship, rather than it being strictly professional (Tattam, *Ballet for Seniors* teacher).

This more personal relationship might be considered participant-led, in that participants have shown interest in the teachers' lives beyond their role as a teacher. Furthermore, the teachers have been invited to the participants' social traditions, such as the coffee ritual, which highlighted the affection class participants have felt towards the teachers as part of their community. The participants perceived the teachers to be of a high calibre and reported that their ballet participation led to greater appreciation for the labour of ballet dancers, and that this appreciation subsequently increased their respect for professional dancers and the *Ballet for Seniors* teachers as ex-professional dancers. Vice versa, there were two elements that indicated to the participants that the teachers respected them. First, that the teachers positioned the participants as the authority of their own bodies. The participants felt that they were encouraged to “listen to [their] body” (Susan, *Ballet for Seniors* participant) and to “do what [their] body wants” (Margaret, *Ballet for Seniors* participant). In this way, participants were credited to have the knowledge and the sensibilities to make choices for themselves, as opposed to the teachers placing specific expectations on them. The second signal of respect reported by participants was that their age did not appear to impact the teachers' approach; in other words, “[t]here's no, sort of, dumbing down for seniors” (Margaret, *Ballet for Seniors* participant). Participants felt like they were receiving the same type of information and feedback that the teachers would give to a younger class. By taking ballet technique seriously, the teachers signalled to the participants that they also take them seriously; that their “brains still work” and that they are “not silly” (Elizabeth, *Ballet for Seniors* participant). What emerged was a teacher-participant relationship that was more personal than other adult ballet classes, mutually-respectful, and while in the context of *Ballet for Seniors*, ballet appeared to be at the centre of the relationship, not age.



Emotional experience of ballet participation

As precluded by their motivations for ballet participation, the participants' emotional experiences of ballet classes most commonly involved feelings of love and enjoyment, but they also reported feelings of fun, freedom, joy, pride, contentment, happiness, feeling good, uplifted, excited, and general improvements in mood. The participant focus groups were often lively and energetic discussions filled with laughter, which further emphasised their pleasure of ballet participation. Their social experiences of ballet participation were also linked to positive emotional experiences. On the contrary, some participants also acknowledged feelings of fear and nervousness in the lead up to their first *Ballet for Seniors* class. The uncertainty of the unknown was particularly pertinent to these feelings:

- ROBYN Will I fit in? Will I make a fool of myself?
Will they laugh at me?
[. . .] Will they like me? Will I like them?
- CHRISTINE Will I be able to do it?
- ROBYN It's all of that sort of thing.
- SUSAN Or what will they expect you to do?

It was acknowledged that this uncertainty cleared once participants had begun dancing. In Susan's case, this fear was very quickly replaced by a tangible commitment to ballet participation through acquiring ballet shoes: "I thought, 'I'll give it a couple of goes before I go and buy any ballet shoes.' And the next minute I was down the Valley, down into that Bloch place, [and] got my shoes."

While contradictory to the quantitative data, the participants reported through the focus groups a greater sense of achievement and happiness as a result of the modified teaching practice, and this was attributed to more challenging movements and exercises. For example, Susan explained how having risen to meet a challenge led to such feelings of achievement: "It just seemed a little bit stronger and harder and that today, and I just felt quite a few of them [the exercises], I did them. You know, I achieved it". Some participants made a connection between subsequent physical pain and positive emotions:

- ROBYN I'll tell you what I like is if the next morning I get out of bed and think, "Oo, that's a little bit of a twingy."
- CHRISTINE "That hurts." *Laughs.*
- ANNE Oo, yes. *Laughs.* That's right.
- ROBYN "The old calves are a bit tight on that one."
And you just think, "That was ballet yesterday.
Great. That means I've moved by body."
- CHRISTINE Yes.
- ROBYN My body's moving properly.
- ANNE Yes, that's it. [. . .]
- ROBYN But it feels good that you've actually used
your body.

The side effects of pushing one's body (i.e., sore muscles) were reported to lead to additional feelings of satisfaction the day after ballet participation, as these side effects were considered evidence of the body "moving properly."

Happiness levels during the modified classes were reported to be as high as feeling "euphoric", and one participant proclaimed that Sundays had become close to being the best part of her week. This comment was particularly pertinent, as this participant also reported that there had previously been a class that was "quite disappoint[ing]" (Robyn, *Ballet for Seniors* participant). While her comments indicated that this displeasure was an isolated occurrence, it highlights that being challenged was an element of the class that contributed to a pleasurable experience. Other emotions reported in response to more challenging class content were greater enthusiasm, confidence, satisfaction, pride, fulfilment, nourishment, and feeling more energised. Overall, the participants reported predominately positive emotional experiences of ballet participation, and in the latter classes felt an increased sense of achievement and happiness which they credited to being offered and rising to more challenging content.

Conclusion

The research findings strongly indicated that ballet participation was considered to be a highly pleasurable activity for active older adults. A love of ballet, enjoyment, feeling a sense of achievement and increased happiness were common emotional experiences that were directly attributed by participants to ballet.

Ballet participation also arose as a weekly social engagement within a supportive, non-competitive, and non-judgemental community of like-minded people. While the qualitative data focused on emotional and social wellbeing, the participants' quantitative responses suggested that they felt physical wellbeing outcomes the strongest (i.e., keeping in shape, bodily control/awareness, posture, flexibility). However, most statements scored an average of 4 or higher, suggesting that ballet participation may contribute to positive outcomes across wellbeing categories. While further research is required to statistically validate these findings, this initial research supports ballet classes as an activity that can support the feeling of wellbeing for active older adults.

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A black and white photograph of a woman with her hair in a bun, smiling warmly. She is wearing a dark, sleeveless top with a textured pattern. The background is a blurred dance studio with other people.

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