

## Portsmouth Pilot Project Evaluation Research

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Dansync is a Dance Partners South East consortium and South East Dance project.



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Dansync was initiated in 2003 as Creative Dance Apprenticeships (CDA). It was renamed Dansync in 2005. This report was written in 2003 and therefore makes reference to CDA rather than Dansync, reflecting the focus of the project in its earlier stages.

## **1. Introduction: South East Dance Creative Dance Apprenticeships Project: Portsmouth Pilot**

This report is the outcome of a seven week pilot project conducted at a Portsmouth-based Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) for **South East Dance**. The pilot project was aimed at introducing 'hard-to-reach' young people, ages 14-16, to street dance and breakdance styles. Stated aims at the beginning of the project from both PRU staff and project staff included:

- Educational enrichment and fun for pupils who had traditionally had bad educational experiences
- Encouraging fitness and confidence
- Exposing participants to new kinds of dance movement.

The project consisted of seven sessions run weekly, although due to scheduling issues sessions 4 and 5 were run in the same week on consecutive days. Two male dance practitioners were employed to teach dance; one with expertise in street dance and one in breakdance.

This pilot project is the first stage of a larger project which South East Dance is seeking to implement and build upon over a period of three years throughout the region. The project has a strong research strand built into it, which South East Dance hopes to develop in conjunction with researchers in Higher Education Institutions. The aim is to generate a methodological framework which can be used to evaluate the various stages of the larger project, with a view to making recommendations for furthering the aims and objectives. In so doing, it is anticipated that this may serve as a model for other similar creative dance projects. The research undertaken in this pilot project was conducted in this spirit. This entails that the research process itself has to be evaluated along with the pilot project.

### ***1.1 Session structure***

Sessions began at 10:00 a.m. and ended at 12:00 p.m. Students were given one fifteen minute break in the middle of the session. Participants were given a warm-up session of about twenty to thirty minutes, followed by stretching, and then learning routines and combinations in street dance and breakdance. The last twenty minutes of sessions were often used for showing video footage of breakdance or for research purposes such as conducting group interviews. A cool-down period was also included at the end of class for more stretching so participants did not injure themselves or get sore muscles.

### ***1.2 Selection and participation***

Participants were largely self-selected, although they were given strong encouragement at the beginning of the project by members of the PRU staff. As the project progressed some participants left while others joined, leaving the group with little consistency from week to week. This presented difficulties in terms of both teaching and project evaluation, as it proved difficult

to follow participants and assess what they had learned over the course of the project. For example, there were no participants who attended every session, although there was one who was at six of seven sessions and several others who attended five of the seven. Even in session six, new participants were still joining the group.

Attendance dropped off during the course of the sessions, with sixteen participants (four girls and twelve boys) attending the first session and five participants attending the last session (two girls and three boys). It should not be assumed that the fall in numbers reflected a lack of interest on behalf of the pupils. As the evaluation will reveal, students did appear to be very engaged with the dance work. There were a number of scheduling factors that could have affected this drop in numbers, including some sessions being held on Wednesdays which, it was later discovered, conflicted with ICT skills classes for one group of participants. In addition, the pilot project was conducted very near the end of the school year and the PRU staff indicated that this was a time when many students' attendance became sporadic.

It should also be noted that attendance did not decline steadily but fluctuated depending on the days on which the sessions were held. Attendance figures for the sessions were as follows:

Session 1: sixteen participants (four girls and twelve boys)

Session 2: seven participants (one girl and six boys)

Session 3: eight participants (two girls and six boys)

Session 4: fourteen participants (four girls and ten boys)

Session 5: Six participants (four girls and two boys)

Session 6: Six participants (two girls and four boys)

Session 7: Five participants (two girls and three boys)

Sessions 5-7 were held on Wednesdays which caused the scheduling conflict noted above.

We were also informed during a final interview with one participant that she had not been allowed to attend one session because she had not been at the previous session, something we were not aware of. In order to avoid this in the future, project leaders should be fully cognisant with the institution's attendance policy for these classes and should ascertain whether the dance classes were seen as a reward for attendance and participation. In terms of aims of the project outlined above, including widening participation, it would be beneficial if the young people were encouraged to participate at every opportunity, particularly when they express an interest.

In order to maximise the aims and objectives of the project for all the young people who wish to be involved, it is important to attempt to minimise external factors, and encourage consistency by scheduling sessions on the same day each week, as far as possible, preferably at dates and times when there are few conflicting events. It is also important to have a clear understanding with staff at the PRU as to any circumstances which might prevent young people from participating in a given session. This would need to be worked out in cooperation with the staff of the PRU or any other institution involved in the project.

## **2. Methodology**

The planned methodology for evaluating the project involved a range of qualitative approaches, which could be adapted easily to accommodate what was initially an 'unknown' research setting. Because the pilot project was quite small, it was considered that quantitative measures would not have been appropriate at this early stage. The methodology involved:

- individual and group interviews with the youth participating in the project at various stages of their progression through it
- group feedback sessions with staff from the PRU and the project in order to get their views
- videotaped observation of each session.

**Interviews** with participants were to focus on:

- their experiences
- impressions of dance
- what they felt they had learned from the project.

**Videotapes** were to be analysed in terms of:

- group interaction
- practitioner/participant interaction
- observable changes in behaviour, skill development
- any observable changes in body comportment.

### **2.1 Group interviews**

The Creative Dance Apprenticeship Project is an innovative initiative in terms of dance in the community. It also needs to be emphasised that researching such a project involves a certain amount of trial and error and innovation on the part of the researcher. Although social researchers have a range of research tools at their disposal, there is not as yet, a coherent, established methodology for conducting research in this area. As a consequence, the researcher needs to proceed with some caution and at the same time, needs to be able to adapt quickly to the situation at hand. The lack of consistency was a major factor in adapting the research methodology as the project progressed. It was not possible, as originally planned, to follow three participants through the course of the project as it was unclear from week to week who might show up for each session. Group interviews with the participants were conducted in weeks 2 and 5 but were generally very unsuccessful in generating useful data. This was particularly the case in Session 5. Of the six young people present, only one actively participated in the interview. A sample below indicates the difficulty of gaining access to participants' experiences in this way (to protect anonymity names have been removed; project staff are indicated with the prefix **R** and participants with **P**):

**R1:** So how do you feel at the end of class, like now when you go back?

**P1:** Hot.

**R1:** Yeah. How else?

**R2:** Hot, sweaty? Feeling good or just tired, bored? Or a good bored, or a good tired?

**P1:** Wanna jump in the bath.

**R1:** Wanna jump in the bath, alright.

How do you feel for the rest of the day, after class?

**P1:** Nothing, 'part from...[inaudible] kicks in

**R2:** It makes you that tired?

**P1:** Yeah.

Qualitative interviewing aims to get people to narrate their experiences in a longer form. Clearly, such short responses give little direct access to the thoughts and feelings of the participants, although the individual's stress on physiological responses (feeling hot, tired, and wanting a bath) could be a strategic device to divert attention away from revealing thoughts and feelings. It may be that this young person was not able to reflect on her experiences in a more substantial manner. Young people may not have well-developed communications skills in the public sphere and may not be able to articulate their experiences in this way. Dance is also something which is rarely expressed in verbal language and research has shown that young people can have difficulties talking about their experiences of dancing. Participants in qualitative research can use withholding information or offering short responses as a way of maintaining control in situations which may make them feel relatively powerless. Researchers have to be aware of these pitfalls and sensitive to the situation at hand. From an examination of this interview on videotape it became apparent that the situation might remind students of a schooling situation and teacher/pupil relationships. This may be avoided in future by taking the participants out of the studio setting where they dance and into an environment more conducive to a 'conversation' type of discussion, based on agreed terms of reference between the researcher and the participants. Additionally, setting aside a specific time at the end of the sessions during which participants could expect to be involved in this 'talking' activity each week might also encourage participation in this part of the project.

## **2.2 Questionnaires**

In order to generate more data to evaluate the project from the participants' point of view, a structured questionnaire was designed and administered in session 7. Participants were given sheets of paper and pens and asked to choose from a list any adjectives which described their experiences in the project, and then to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement, on a scale of 1-5, with a series of numbered statements (The questionnaire is provided in Appendix 1). This proved relatively successful in that the three participants present at the end of the session all responded to it, and three other participants' responses were sent in subsequently. The data could then be taken away and analysed quantitatively, although any results can only be suggestive because of the size of the sample. With projects such as this, which are small-scale and exploratory, quantitative data needs to be supplemented by qualitative data, in order to generate more open-ended responses. The questionnaire could also be administered on a one to one basis with the researcher writing down the responses. This could be taped and would leave more opportunity for more open-ended feedback from the participants. The young people in this context should not be confronted with a list of questions which they would be expected to read and respond to, because this might require greater literacy skills than some of them have attained to date, and once again may put pressure upon them.

## **2.3 Videotaped interviews**

Individual interviews were conducted with three participants during the break time in session 7; two of these were videotaped and one was audio taped because the student wished not to be videoed. These interviews were successful, particularly when compared to the group interviews. Participants were asked about the number of sessions they had attended and why, their ideas about dance, their feelings about what they had learned and the length of the sessions, whether they had recognised the dance style they were learning in any other places such as on music

videos, and why they sat down in the classes when they chose to do this. The most effective strategy was to ask a steady stream of questions, allowing responses but not leaving long pauses in the expectation of lengthy feedback. Participants spoke very highly of the sessions. They said that it had made a positive impact on their impressions of dancing. Those who were asked said that they would definitely participate in such classes again.

It is unlikely that these one to one interviews would have been so successful at the beginning of the project when participants were new to dance and the staff and before they had the opportunity to build up trust. The fact that the students were happy to talk at the end of the project suggests that this type of interviewing at this stage of the project should be repeated in the next phase of the project.

## ***2.4 Feedback sessions***

Feedback sessions with staff were held after every dance class, but these were most effective when they were held outside of the dance studio in a separate space more conducive to conversation. During these sessions teaching strategies were discussed and feedback was given by the PRU staff about the students, why they may or may not have been participating in that day's session, and if they had been talking about the classes or practicing the dance combinations they had learned. It is of particular interest to note that while all the students denied practicing or thinking about the dance combinations outside of the classes, teachers mentioned on several occasions that they had seen them dancing in the classrooms and heard them discussing the dance they were learning, indicating that they were taking a real interest in what they were being taught which extended outside of the dance lessons themselves.

## ***2.5 Videotaped sessions***

Videotaping of sessions did not start until session 3 because permission forms had to be secured from the PRU for each participant. With a longer lead time on future projects it should be possible to secure these before the project begins, giving more opportunity for comparison from the beginning to the end of the project. However, the issue of trust and confidence would need to be taken into consideration when deciding at what point to introduce the video camera. Generally participants were able to ignore the video camera and were not disturbed by it. One girl was particularly sensitive about the presence of the camera and explicitly said she did not wish to be filmed, commenting "don't point that thing at me".

The video footage itself proved to be extremely useful as it gave more distance from the sessions than was possible in observing and participating on the day. It pointed to a number of issues regarding participation and skill development, which are explained more fully below.

# **3. Research Findings**

## ***3.1 Ensuring that participants' 'voices' are heard***

One of the key goals for future research needs to be finding ways of ensuring that the young participants have a 'voice', and a way of representing themselves in relation to their dance experiences. The aim of the full Creative Dance Apprenticeships Project to involve video production will help in this. As discussed below, the students sometimes chose to sit out of the classes and watch, and one way of getting them involved would be to offer them video cameras

and get them to record the group dancing as a way of 'seeing through their eyes'. It might also help them find ways of talking about dance and movement and their experiences of it.

### **3.2 Participants' experiences with music and dance**

In the second session, a focus group interview was conducted and questions were asked about the kinds of music and dance the participants knew about or liked, and what they expected when they heard they were going to learn dance. The purpose of this was to get a sense of their cultural expectations and background in relation to dance. Seven young people were present at this session and most participated actively in the discussion.

Participants indicated that the styles of music they listened to most were rap and hard house, and that they were interested in rave dancing. The assumption that street dance and breakdance were the most appealing dance forms for them to learn was therefore not necessarily correct. At the same time, however, they did indicate shifts in their perceptions about dance:

**R1:** Okay, when you heard you were going to be dancing, what did you think it was going to be?

**P1:** Sissy dancing.

**R1:** Sissy dancing, like what?

**R2:** What's sissy dancing exactly?

**P3:** Girly dancing.

What was it you called me earlier after me doing the thing?

**P2:** Queer.

**P3:** Queer, yeah.

**R2:** Did you think the dancing was queer?

**P2:** No.

Questionnaire responses indicated that most participants agreed with the statement that taking the class had changed their attitudes toward dance (all but one participant indicated levels of 4 or 5 out of 5 for this question). Participants had mixed feelings about whether knowing how to dance was important, indicating levels of between 2 and 5 in their agreement with this statement on the questionnaire. One to one interviews supported the questionnaire data and participants commented that their impressions of dance were more positive after having taken the class. They also indicated that they recognised some of the steps they were learning from music videos such as Justin Timberlake's. The project, therefore, seems to have provoked new ways of thinking about dance and looking at dance for the young people involved.

### **3.3 Skill development**

Observing the video footage of the classes gave a sense of how the skills of the participants *had* developed. Although there were fewer participants in the last session than in the first, this seemed to be an advantage in terms of allowing the participants more individual attention from the dance practitioners and giving them space to spread out in the studio.

The participants' skills developed well over the course of the seven sessions. Over the last few sessions particularly, their focus grew and they spent less time sitting on the side and watching the dancing and more time actively participating in the classes. They appeared to be concentrating hard on learning the routines. In the last session, they were given a short routine

which they performed in two groups, facing one another. All appeared to be really enjoying themselves and put their energy into the performance, developing performing skills as well as just remembering the combinations of steps. During Session 4 they were also given the opportunity to do small group work, developing a short eight-count routine from the steps they had been learning earlier in the session. Again they were actively engaged in this task, which resulted in some nice group cooperation and teaching. Future projects should take into account the success of this small group work and employ it where appropriate to develop performance skills and encourage creativity.

Participants also came to the class dressed in clothes appropriate for dancing. This suggests that they were thinking about the classes in the morning before arriving at the PRU. This is also a positive sign in terms of their desire to be involved in the project.

One phenomenon that kept recurring in the sessions was that participants would sit out for a portion of the class; joining and then sitting on the sidelines again as they chose. This was quite discouraging for the project staff, particularly when large groups of the participants were sitting out. While this should be observed sensitively, as it may indicate boredom or discouragement with the learning process, this was not necessarily as negative as it first appeared. From a close examination of the videotapes, it became apparent that the participants sitting on the sidelines were still very involved in a kind of 'active viewing' of the class. Rather than talking to one another, they were very focused on what was being taught, and would often mirror the movements on a smaller scale from where they sat. Since they rarely seemed disinterested, it is important to consider other issues which might affect whether or not they were dancing, including fatigue, levels of physical fitness, and concentration. . It may be that they simply enjoyed sitting out and looking at what the others were doing, as the students were very attentive to the dancers on the floor during group 'showings'.

Teaching generally seemed to work best when it was delivered in short bursts with little time for marking the combinations and fewer repetitions. Participants also tended to drop out when the music was turned off, so this was an important factor in keeping them involved. Music, as a whole range of studies demonstrate, is very important to young people. One PRU staff member indicated that participants said they liked faster-paced music. When asked why they sat out, the participants responded that they were tired, rather than bored. Given that a number of the participants do not seem to engage in much other physical activity, their physical fitness needs to be taken into account when designing teaching sequences. Learning an unfamiliar dance style and/or routine involves learning to develop a movement memory. This may require much more mental concentration than football or other physical activities with which students are familiar, and can do without having to think about it very much. Thus, in this instance, it may be suggested that dance takes more energy on a mental as well as physical level. As sitting out of the classes happened less as the classes progressed there is also an indication that this became easier over time and could be developed.

### ***3.4 Gender and participation***

One of the most immediately apparent issues in the project was the gender divide between boys and girls. From the first session, they came in and segregated themselves on opposite sides of the room. This continued throughout the first few sessions, and was particularly evident when there were more girls present, as they tended to join or sit out as a group, always aware of what the other girls were doing. Initially there was a significant difference in the way they moved their bodies while learning the routines as well; the girls put less energy into dancing and

seemed to be marking the steps. They also appeared less interested in the dance as a whole, although occasional breaks from the routine and showing off of steps indicated that several of them had strong dance skills. However, in one session the girls appeared to work well together with one particular woman from the project team, who coaxed and encouraged them onto the floor, to show them that they could learn and perform steps that they had experienced difficulties with in the larger teaching group.

These divisions became less pronounced as the sessions progressed. However, much of the style and attitude necessary for doing street dance and breakdance successfully and with flare are quite masculine in orientation. It may be that the style of movement itself is particularly uncomfortable for girls, particularly when they start out. If this is a recurring problem, it might be helpful to consider the gender balance of the dance practitioners and make sure one was a woman. However, as members of the PRU staff pointed out, many of the boys have very negative attitudes toward women and might therefore react very negatively to having a female dance teacher. On the other hand proving that women can do breakdance and street dance might also be a way of shifting their perceptions. This is an issue worth further exploration and research.

An examination of the videotapes revealed that the girls seemed to move more easily in the smaller space, although this was perhaps not such a good teaching space as the larger room. There was less room in the smaller space for students to divide up into separate (gendered) groups.

### **3.5 Staff Support**

The PRU staff were extremely positive and helpful in regard to the pilot project. They showed a high level of enthusiasm for the goals of the project and participated actively whenever they could. This meant that there were often very many staff present at the dance classes. Their demonstrated enthusiasm and consistency was a good model for their pupils, but it may also have acted as a substitute for the pupils being involved themselves. On two occasions, one routine became too long or complicated for the pupils and they began to sit down until finally only one was left. If there had been fewer staff participating, this lack of pupil participation would have had to have been addressed at that point in time and discussed with the participants. Instead the class continued as usual with a number of (adult) participants still on the floor dancing.

Although certain PRU staff-to-pupil ratios had to be maintained in case of behaviour problems, it might be useful to consider the proportions of staff to students on future projects to see if this affects participation: Are pupils more likely to dance if they see fewer staff on the floor? Is not participating when there are many staff there a tool for separating oneself from the teaching staff? It would also be useful to see if conducting group interviews was more effective without the staff present. Again, the tendency for the staff to jump in and try to provoke discussion may have the effect of silencing the young people or encouraging them to give only positive responses.

However, it is important that when teachers are present they participate in the dance classes, and the PRU staff were very good at this. It is also easier for a researcher to access participants' experiences and encourage them to communicate if both researcher and participant are actively dancing. The mutual experience of trying to learn new steps and combinations provides the basis for a common ground. Dancing together overcomes, to some

extent, the unequal power relationship between researchers/staff and participants, and so is useful for building trust.

One possibility to consider for future projects, given the enthusiasm of the PRU staff for the dance classes, would be teaching the staff with the explicit goal of giving them the skills to teach the dance themselves. This would obviously be most useful for those involved in teaching physical education, but would encourage much wider participation and allow the project to reach a greater audience.

#### **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

Overall, the project was successful in its goals of providing new educational experiences for 'hard to reach' youth and teaching them new skills. There were no behavioural problems among the participants during the course of the pilot project, a good indication of their focus and interest in the project. In relation to their observed behaviour in other classes at the PRU, participants behaved extremely well and responded very positively to the project and project staff.

Recommendations for further projects include:

- Encouraging small group work and creativity with the routines where possible
- Encouraging the groups to perform to each other, as participants responded very positively to this and indicated that they would like to do more of it
- Teaching lessons in short bursts with rest time in between, to develop fitness and physical/mental coordination gradually
- Involving the participants in the videoing process as a way of getting their views
- Looking further at the gender issues involved in teaching street dance and breakdance styles to young women in particular
- Possibly considering having both male and female teachers on the project
- Developing a research methodology that relies less on reports from participants in group interviews
- Changing the setting and style of the interviews so that they are less reminiscent of class teaching, while working on developing individual interviews from the middle to end of the project
- Setting out a regular time slot at the end of each session when participants could expect to be involved in the research.
- Ensuring that the methodology is flexible enough to be adapted to new situations and unforeseen circumstances.

## ***Appendix 1: Questionnaire***

Male/Female:\_\_\_\_

Circle any words that apply to you:

1. At the end of dance class I am: a) tired b) sweaty c) sore
2. After the class I feel: a) relaxed b) energised c) focused d) calm

Answer the next questions on a scale of 1 to 5. 1 is disagree totally, 2 is disagree a bit, 3 is neutral or don't know/don't care, 4 is agree a bit, and 5 is agree totally.

3. Taking the dance class has changed my attitude toward dance:
4. I liked learning street dance:
5. I liked learning breakdance:
6. The dance classes were the right length:
7. I had enough time to learn the combinations:
8. It was easier to dance when there were fewer staff there:
9. I may use what I learned in this dance class again:
10. Knowing how to dance is important:
11. I would recommend this kind of class to other people:

# Dansync gratefully acknowledges funding from:



CALOUSTE  
GULBENKIAN  
FOUNDATION

West Sussex  
Positive  
Activities for  
Young People

Dansync was conceived, part-funded and delivered by Dance Partners South East consortium in partnership with South East Dance

