



Brief Communication

Ballet for Seniors Living in Low-Income Housing: A Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explored perceptions among older persons living in low-income housing in the southeastern United States about their experience of participating in Ballet for Seniors, a 10-week ballet class. The classes, led by a ballet instructor, met twice weekly for 1 hr. Four participants (three Black women and one white man) were interviewed individually 10 months after the last class and thematic analysis was used to analyze interview transcripts. The three female participants continued practicing ballet movement 10 months after the class ended. Results validate the Ballet for Seniors class as a viable additional or alternative mode of physical activity to enhance the physical health and psychological well-being of this population. Participants added value to their daily lives through engagement in meaningful physical activities. This study suggests there is a need to increase access to such classes for older adults living in low-income communities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The health benefits of physical activity for older persons are well documented.¹ However, physical activity levels among older persons with low incomes, including those who live in subsidized housing, have been reported to be particularly low.² One way to motivate these older adults to participate in physical activity may be through the use of dance, as low-income ethnic minorities, especially Black and Hispanic women, have reported that they favor dancing over other forms of exercise.³ One emerging form of dance-based mind-motor activity is social ballet, which has been shown to improve balance and stability.⁴ Several qualitative studies have explored older persons' experience of participating in ballet training.⁵⁻⁷ However, the majority of participants in these studies were older, white, middle-class women.^{5,7} In addition, previous studies sought participants' perspectives immediately after

their participation in ballet classes.^{5,6} Therefore, there is a need to understand the full longer-term impact of ballet training for older persons. The purpose of this study was to explore through individual interviews the experience of older persons, especially Black women, living in low-income housing, who took part in a Ballet for Seniors class about 1 year ago.

2. METHODS

Four residents of a low-income housing community who completed the 10-week Ballet for Seniors class series (two 1-hr classes per week) with a subsequent public performance in another low-income housing community participated in this qualitative study (see Supplementary file for a description of ballet class content). The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Alabama at Birmingham, IRB Protocol #: IRB-300003002.

Researchers conducted individual semi-structured telephone interviews with all four participants (three Black women and one white man) 10 months after completion of the Ballet for Seniors class to solicit the perceptions about their experiences, and the impact of these experiences on their daily life. The interviewer used an interview guide that was adapted from a previous study.⁶ Key questions from the interview guide are shown in Table 1. The interview sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. We used a thematic analysis approach as it is suitable for exploring participants' perceptions of their experiences with the Ballet for Seniors class.⁸

3. RESULTS

The mean and standard deviation (SD) age of the participants was 79 (SD 10; range, 73–94 years), and the mean and SD length of stay in the housing community was 8.2 years (SD 4.0; range, 4.5–12.0 years). All participants were retired, able to walk without assistive devices, and lived alone in one of the apartments in the housing community. None had participated in a ballet class before. Three participants

attended all sessions, and one missed three sessions. The average attendance rate of the participants was more than 96%. Three female participants continued practicing ballet movement 10 months after the class ended.

Participants expressed overwhelmingly positive and satisfied attitudes toward the class. Some of the words and phrases they used to describe their class experiences were “fun,” “enjoyment,” “awesome,” “wonderful,” and “learned a lot.” In addition, they demonstrated high levels of motivation, and practiced with persistence and determination to learn the ballet class work and subsequent choreography. Beyond general satisfaction and determination, four themes emerged: quality of the dance instructor, perceived physical health benefits, psychological well-being, and add value to daily activities.

3.1. Quality of the Dance Instructor

Participants described the instructor’s supportive attitude, which included providing them with patient, tolerant support and enjoyable, unexpectedly pleasurable class experiences and enhancing their desire to continue attending the class, as described in the following comments:

I tell you [instructor] at first, like I said, it was no way I could do a "plie-half," or whatever that other, we was doing. ...But at the end, you [instructor] brought us through. (Participant E, female, 77 years old)

3.2. Perceived Physical Health Benefits

Participants reported perceived benefits in posture, balance, upper body strength, agility, and flexibility resulting from participation in the ballet class. They also considered it a good form of physical exercise. This was reflected in the following comments:

My balance was really a lot better when I got finished with it [the ballet classes]... If you go at it and stay with it and it sure does something about your core strength and your core balance.... I feel like I'm stronger now, especially in my upper body. (Participant H, male, 74 years old)

3.3. Psychological Well-Being

Several participants were surprised that, as older persons, they could learn and do something new and challenging (i.e., ballet choreography) that they did not initially think they could do, which may have changed their view of self and aging. As a result, this achievement heightened their sense of self-worth and served as a means of enhancing their self-concept. These benefits, together with personal growth, enhanced their sense of well-being. Learning and achieving skills in ballet also bestowed a sense

Table 1. Interview guiding questions to explore the post-Ballet for Seniors class experience

Themes	Questions
Reaction to Ballet for Seniors experience	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What did you hope for signing up for Ballet for Seniors? 2. How would you describe the Ballet for Seniors experience? 3. Describe what it was like to participate in Ballet for Seniors. 4. What was it like to work with me in learning ballet movement in the class? 5. How did your hopes for Ballet for Seniors compare with your actual experience?
Concerns, limitations, and difficulties/ barriers of Ballet for Seniors and suggestions for improvement	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe the process of learning ballet movements in the class. [Prompt, level of frustration and fatigue] 2. What did you like/dislike about Ballet for Seniors? 3. Based on your experience, what were the difficulties you encountered in practicing ballet movements in the class? 4. How would you compare the Ballet for Seniors experience with other activities? [Prompt, relative advantages and/or drawbacks] 5. What would you like to change about Ballet for Seniors if it is offered in the future?
Acceptability, satisfaction, and usefulness of Ballet for Seniors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How satisfied are you with the Ballet for Seniors experience? 2. How useful was learning the ballet movement in the class? (e.g., did it help improve your balance?) 3. What was the most useful part of Ballet for Seniors for you? 4. What benefits of Ballet for Seniors were there for you?
Impact on daily activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Compared to before Ballet for Seniors, how do you feel about yourself? 2. How did the Ballet for Seniors experience change the daily activities of your life?

of self-confidence/self-efficacy. Participants were proud of performing ballet in another housing community, which gave meaning and purpose to their involvement in the class, as indicated in the following statement:

An elderly group performing as well as we did. I think we done real well. I was proud of myself and proud of the group... It gave me confidence in myself, and confidence in elderly people. (Participant L, female, 94 years old)

3.4. Add Value to Daily Activities

Participants shared that the classes added value to their daily activities by enriching them through ballet barre and floor work as another form of exercise. They reported practicing outside of class and continuing to practice 10 months after the Ballet for Seniors class. They expressed a desire for continued sessions after the class ended, as indicated in the following statement:

I think of what we did even when we were on the patio out there sometimes; I get up and make a few moves in front of Ms. W [participant U], and she'll say, "Oh, Ms. H [participant E]. you're balleting?" and I say, "Yes, that's what I'm doing." (laughs) (Participant E, female, 77 years old)

4. DISCUSSION

The four participants who joined the Ballet for Seniors were committed to the class, and felt it was a meaningful physical activity. This study revealed that older persons living in a low-income community who participated in the Ballet for Seniors class viewed ballet movement as a form of enjoyable physical exercise that enhanced their sense of physical health and psychological well-being and added value to their daily activities. Participants perceived ballet as a form of exercise that helped improve their posture, balance, upper body strength, and agility, which is consistent with physical health benefits of ballet reported across the literature.^{4,5,7} The experience of being able to learn ballet choreography as an older person imbued participants' involvement in the class with meaning and purpose, and therefore enhanced their psychological well-being. The ballet choreography the participants learned in the class also added value to their daily activities and a meaningful activity to their lives. These findings are similar to those reported in the literature, specifically, the finding that older adult learners valued ballet classes as an important part of their lives.^{4,7}

In the beginning, participants were apprehensive about the challenges of learning ballet, and felt they would not be able to learn and perform ballet. However, at the completion of the class, participants

awakened to their unexpected ability, had a positive experience with the class, and appreciated its health benefits. In addition, we learned that arranging for participants to perform in a low-income housing community other than their own can both inspire others living in these communities and enhance the self-worth of the performers.

The findings indicate that participants valued not only the experience of the Ballet for Seniors class, but also the dedicated and patient instructor, who motivated them and helped them feel confident that they could learn ballet and choreography at an older age. Dance instructors directly mediate both the flow of classes and their environment⁹, therefore, having a high-quality dance instructor is essential for the success of these classes.

Class-based activities like Ballet for Seniors have a strong embedded social element. The participants did not explicitly mention any social benefits of the class, such as fostering friendships, because all three Black female participants knew each other well and were good friends. The group bonding motivated all four participants to attend all the classes, except when outside circumstances prevented it.

With only four participants completing an individual interview, it was not feasible for us to determine whether the analysis reached theoretical saturation for the themes. However, findings (i.e., emerged themes) were congruent with previous studies⁵⁻⁷, which indicates some degree of transferability.

While this study provides important insights about the unique experience of seniors living in low-income housing participating in the ballet dancing for seniors program, its findings should be considered in light of several limitations. Interviewer bias is a major issue in qualitative research, especially with the use of qualitative interviews to evaluate the program being investigated.¹⁰ We should have chosen an interviewer who the participants had never met. The reason we chose the interviewer who is the acquaintance of the participants to conduct interviews was to capitalize on the strong trust and rapport that had been established between the interviewer and the four participants. Having the interviewer whom the participant knew to conduct interviews may have led to a higher potential for response bias to please the interviewer. However, the theme of having high-quality dance instructors conduct the Ballet for Seniors class was consistent with a previous study in which the researchers used several avenues to collect data, including interviewing a class participant focus group and the instructors, as well as class observation.^{5,6} In this study, the quality of the dance instructor played a significant role in the social experience of ballet participation.^{5,6} We acknowledge the high potential for response bias due created by using the interviewer who the participants

are acquainted; however, based on the congruence of the findings between the current and previous Ballet for Seniors study^{5,6}, the interviewer bias in the current study seems no higher than that would occur if research staff who were not acquainted with participants conducted the interviews.

Another limitation is the drawback of interviewing the participants only once, 10 months after the classes ended. Participants may have selectively remembered their experiences or mixed them up with other events irrelevant to the class, and therefore introduced bias. To strengthen the credibility of the findings, a future study should interview the participants at least twice, once immediately after the end of the class series, and a second time several months later. Such a design can better capture both the immediate and sustained impact of the class.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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