

Making the case for movement and dance: “Not just the decoration on the top...”

Credit: Tracy Levy.



As she reveals a powerful new report making the case for investing in dance and movement for all, **Tracy Levy**, former Chair of the Movement and Dance Division of the Sport and Recreation Alliance 2015-2021, talks the importance of translating the joy it brings to those involved into a language that speaks to the heart of government.



Bistro Fada choreographed by Sue Jack. Photo: Tracy Levy, copyright Margaret Morris Movement International.



Celebration choreographed for Centenary celebration in 2010 by Jim Hastie. Photo: Tracy Levy, copyright Margaret Morris Movement International.

deliver movement and exercise classes to adults of all ages, from seated classes to whole-body movement sessions, where the chair is only used for coats, jackets, bags, and water bottles. A full class is a delight, but when you really look, we know we are delivering more than dance and exercise.

As teachers, we share the satisfaction of participants improving bit by bit each week – balancing for longer, nailing tricky combinations – and, as dancers, we feel the progress when we do one more, better, slower or faster, coming together to finish in time to the music. Class is an escape from the pressures of school, exams, work, caring for partners or parents. We see the person who has had a cancer scare, the person who walks in alone, but walks out talking to someone; the faces that light up at a song, the child who shines with the delight of a dance and the collective sigh at the end of something that was ‘just so lovely to do’.

Whatever triggers the initial motivation to join class, we are repaid in multiple ways – better school/work-life balance, increased fitness and energy, laughter, confidence, and being part of a community and where we can be ourselves, for ourselves.

As the chair of the Movement and Dance Division (2015-2021), a division of the Sport and Recreation Alliance (SRA) (1), I would advocate for movement and dance (M&D) within physical activity at every event I attended, but was told it would never get on the government agenda without evidence. In 2019, as I started my final two-year term as Chair, Lisa Wainwright MBE, CEO of the SRA, asked what

I wanted for the Division. Without hesitation, I replied that I wanted M&D to be equal to sport and not ‘the decoration on the top’.

M&D falls between the gaps of art and sport, but we know we have an impact within physical activity, so the question was: how, with very limited resources, could we demonstrate that within physical activity and sport, M&D were equally beneficial with meaningful and valuable impacts and outcomes?

In March 2020, I began a consultation – forced onto zoom by the first UK lockdown of the COVID 19 pandemic – in the form of series of interactive workshops transferred to the virtual world. This tested us all, but provided a sense of purpose, personally and professionally, during those long months when we could not physically dance together.

We used the five key outcomes for sport and physical activity as defined in Sporting Future: A New Strategy for an Active Nation (2) as a template. These are:

- physical wellbeing
- mental wellbeing
- individual development
- social and community development
- economic development.

We swapped the word ‘sport’ for ‘dance’ to consider if we achieved them through M&D.

The Social Impact of Movement and Dance in the UK report (3), published in 2021, sought to ‘state the case’ for M&D within physical activity, but, with just anecdotal evidence, we needed more to stand

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alongside traditional sports. The only way we could compare M&D to sports was to treat them like sports. We needed data. The SRA Research team embarked on a Social Value project using Active Lives Data (4), analysing M&D as if it were a sport, and researchers (5) undertook a literature review of evidence-based research to demonstrate the impact of M&D.

On 28th June 2023 The Social Value of Movement and Dance report (6) was formally launched by the SRA at Westminster. M&D were centre stage, hosted by the Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group Sport, Kim Leadbeater, MP. We were delighted that ballroom royalty Shirley Ballas and Marius Iepure, were able to join us and so generous with their time.

With the 3 All-Party Parliamentary Groups – Sport (7), Dance (8) and Performing Arts Education and Training (9) – and representatives from public health, NHS, education, Sport England and Parliamentarians, we were centre of the room, not in the corner looking in and we had face to face access with those who influence policy within physical activity. Everyone was talking about the benefits of dance and how it changes lives. Headline numbers are:

- £3.49 billion in social value savings is generated by M&D, which represents 5% of total social value savings generated by community sport and physical activity.
- £157.56 million of savings in the prevention and management of Type II diabetes
- M&D contributes 7% of total savings to breast cancer within physical activity.

- Of every £20 of social value created by sport and physical activity, £1 is created uniquely by movement and dance.

Reading the full document and literature review, you see your class participants, friends and family; that joining a Greek dancing class can increase hand strength; that access to M&D via Social Prescribing alleviates loneliness. Everything we, as teachers, know to be true is dancing on the pages and the monetary savings shine a spotlight on our impact and value.

Shirley Ballas expressed her passion for M&D, opening her address by saying the research demonstrates “the benefits are undeniable, making all forms of M&D a valuable tool for personal and societal improvement” and we nodded with a collective understanding of how dance brought someone with dementia back to their family.

Marius Iepure told us how a young person didn’t know he liked dance until he was given a chance to try and about teachers who create safe places and spaces for children to dance, keeping them from gangs and the dangers of the streets. Susan Walsh, head teacher at Hague Primary School, Bethnal Green, spoke about how M&D led by Language of Dance teachers creates cohesion in her school.

I stood watching the people in the room.

In a far corner, a group were talking all things dance. They all found dance in different places and different times in their lives. Some, like many children, had started in local halls at Saturday dance class. Others had followed the sound of some music



Left: Bistro Fada choreographed by Sue Jack. Photo: Tracy Levy, copyright Margaret Morris Movement International.
Below: Medau Ribbons. Photo: Paul Lang.

and, peeping cautiously into the room, discovered the world of salsa and ballroom. One became a Strictly Celebrity and others became dance teachers, adjudicators and board members, all sharing their passion for dance – in halls like ones in which they had learned to dance.

In 2020, I began this work, with support and collaboration from M&D Members, their teachers and SRA staff, because someone had faith in me to make it happen. It was only when I separated myself from it and looked in as an outsider that I could truly appreciate the monumental steps we had taken, which culminated in a room of M&D practitioners encapsulating the value of what we do within physical activity.

What next?

What started as an acorn has grown into an ever-branching tree. This report is the beginning. Our impact and previously uncalculated, undocumented contributions are available for everyone to use in this document, which must be used in policy, decision making and funding. Local teachers need recognition for their contribution to the physical activity ecosystem as they dance under the radar. Everyone should have the opportunity to experience quality M&D throughout all stages of life and find a dance that suits them and their wants and needs. Because there is a dance for everyone, and everyone should be allowed to dance their dance.

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Info

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