



# “Never a line drawn or a spark put out”

Supporting visibility and challenging assumptions  
through youth dance in Scotland



YDance is the national dance organisation for children and young people in Scotland. It provides a range of dance opportunities across the country in rural and urban communities for young people aged 0-25 years from a diverse backgrounds and experiences. Here, Artistic Director, **Anna Kenrick** and **Kelly Shearer**, Head of Participation reflect, through three recent projects, on the direction it has taken to support the visibility of and access to dance for young disabled people, young people at risk and New Scots.

“Belonging is the capacity to see the humanity in those that are not like us and to recognise that the same elements that exist within them also exist in us. It means that we have to see the humanity in others, even if they refuse to see the same in us.” (1)

In October 2022 Anna went to a performance at Tramway in Glasgow to watch emerging artists from Project X perform new work and she met some participants from a project YDance delivered in 2010. Now, as adults working in dance and the arts, it was emotional to hear how connected they still felt to the Under The Same Sky (UTSS) project they experienced in their school and youth club as teenagers. It gave them a sense of belonging and validation and it supported their life choices in the years to come. It made Anna think about the journey YDance has been on over the last 15 years, the strategic direction it has taken; the impact we have had in supporting visibility for children and young people who experience barriers to dance, challenging assumptions about who can dance and the importance of dance in today’s world.

The UTSS project in 2010 and the ‘Free To Dance’ project, which ran from 2008 - 2012, were turning points for YDance. These projects worked with young parents, children excluded from school, children from ethnically diverse backgrounds, refugees and young carers. They highlighted the huge impact inclusive creative dance sessions >>

Take The Lead. Photo: Paul Watt.



can have with marginalised communities and how self-confidence and self-efficacy can be transformed with prolonged and meaningful engagement. Projects led by experienced, deeply trained, compassionate and empathetic staff were delivered in partnership with organisations that understood the local group or community. They demonstrated how, if there is true partnership and a defined practice, then dance can be a kinaesthetic learning opportunity that provides connection points for participants with their peers, schools and communities.

Over the last fifteen years, YDance has committed to working in a socially engaged way using dance a tool for learning, self-development and empowerment. Social, emotional, physical and creative development are at the heart of our work and projects are designed around the values of creativity, curiosity, bravery, inclusion and fun.

The child is at the centre of the learning, so that they can learn key aspects about the artform of dance and learn through dance about aspects of themselves, each other and their place in the world.

Scotland is leading the way championing the rights of the child by embedding the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into all aspects of society, ensuring children and young people are heard and seen. YDance believes the arts and, specifically, dance offers children a unique opportunity to find and strengthen their voice through a rich cultural experience that can give a sense of belonging. The following projects highlight how we are trying to support visibility and challenge assumptions by giving young people a brave space to develop life enhancing skills, experience joy, to navigate their lives through these uncertain times.



Left: Horizons. Photo: Ewen Wetherspoon.  
Below left: UTSS. Photo: Y Dance.



**Cashback for Change (CB4C) 2020-2023**

“I’ve dealt with depression and anxiety my whole life and I cope with it relatively well, but performing arts has played a major part in helping me with it since I’ve been in here. I don’t know how I’d cope in here without it. I definitely want to continue with performing arts when I leave Polmont.” – Participant from His Majesty’s Young Offenders Institute (HMYOI Polmont).

The CashBack for Change project is funded

by the Scottish Government’s CashBack for Communities initiative, which sees the proceeds of crime seized, and put back into the communities who need it most. CB4C uses dance as a tool to engage and positively influence young people aged 10-24 years who are most at risk of displaying anti-social behaviours and/or entering the criminal justice system. This is achieved through a programme of free weekly dance activities across three strands in:

- HMYOI Polmont, Scotland’s national holding facility for young offenders aged 16 - 21
- targeted alternative education/secure centres
- communities in areas of multiple deprivation and/or higher crime rates

The Scottish Government has the ambition for Scotland “to be the best place in the world to grow up” and, in their approach to Justice for Children and Young People, the focus has been put on prevention and early intervention for young people who are at risk. CB4C is informed by the GIRFEC model (Getting it Right for Every Child) as well as aligning with the UNCRC as a rights-respecting programme, placing the wellbeing of the young person at the centre of our work.

The project aims to

- build confidence and resilience
- strengthen support networks
- reduce risk taking behaviour
- improve health and wellbeing through physical and personal skills development
- support contribute positively to their communities
- improve learning, employability, and employment options (positive destinations)

Working in close partnership with organisations such as Barnardo’s, who are committed to protecting young people’s childhood and adolescence, we cultivate stable, empowering, and trusted relationships with young people who need the most support.

YDance artists have been developing a practice that gives a brave space, time and a sense of freedom to young people who are vulnerable and display distressed and/or risk-taking behaviours. New-found confidence and communication methods can lead to tangible positive changes in behaviour, which can, in turn, help to change societal attitudes on young offenders and youth crime.

YDance’s approach for CB4C is holistic and trauma-responsive. In all sessions, our artists prioritise safety, trust, collaboration, choice, and empowerment. They commit to listening to the

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voice of the participants to inform and shape the journey of the programme. Young peoples' views and interests guide sessions using the principles of co-creation to promote ownership and agency. We regularly conduct informal and formal collection of ideas and views, which have been acted on and shared as part of our ongoing evaluation.

### **Horizons (2016 to present)**

YDance Horizons is our inclusive performance programme for young disabled and non-disabled people aged 12-25. We have our flagship company based in Glasgow, as well as two satellite companies: Horizons Aberdeen (in partnership with Citymoves Dance Agency) and Horizons Inverness (in partnership with Eden Court Theatre).

From experience workshops in targeted Additional Support Needs (ASN) schools and organisations who support disabled young people, to monthly sessions with a YDance Artist creating work, we are creating opportunities and progression routes for young disabled people who have a passion for dance. Our most recent addition to the programme is a year-long, paid traineeship for a young disabled dancer/artist.

The strategic outcomes of the project are:

- more accessible participatory dance opportunities in Scotland for young people aged 12-25
- more performance opportunities for young disabled dancers in Scotland
- more opportunities for training, development and employment for young disabled dancers aged 18-25 in Scotland

One participant's parent praised the inclusive practice on the project as "invaluable and life-changing":

"[My daughter] was SO excited to be part of a group where instructions were supportive, clear and where creativity was at the heart of the activities. Her head was held as high going into the Horizons class as it was coming out. She loved meeting with other 'dancers' who treated her as one of their own and gave her that sense of belonging to a group she had never had before.

There was never a line drawn or a spark put out – instead the children were very clearly at the centre and that is where the inclusion is so evident.

We are indebted to the programme (which has) allowed our daughter to grow in confidence and believe further in her ability to perform regardless of whether she can remember the next instruction or not."

YDance artists use compassion and openness to engage with the young participants on a personal level. We believe our inclusive and person-centred approach to our work supports Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs), in particular:

- enjoying participation in community traditions
- feeling supported by friends
- having at least two non-parent adults who take a genuine interest

The social aspects of dance and the fact that Horizons sessions are for disabled young people and their non-disabled peers means that support networks for all involved grow and strengthen.

### **Diverse Moves (2022-2023)**

"I like to dance and see friends; it helps me get out of a studying mood and we get to do our own [traditional Syrian] dancing too." – Feedback from participant

Diverse Moves delivers inspiring and inclusive dance sessions to young refugees and asylum



Far left: UTSS. Photo: Y Dance.  
Left: Ignite. Photo: Y Dance.

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seekers as well as young people from the home communities in North Ayrshire. Working closely with various departments in North Ayrshire Council, we target socially, and culturally diverse groups of participants aged 6 – 21. Through the project, they are able to build better physical health and mental wellbeing whilst raising their confidence, self-esteem, and life-skills through dance.

The strategic outcomes of the project are for

- dance to promote diversity and social inclusion within communities
- young people to improve their physical and emotional wellbeing
- young people to develop confidence, creativity, self-expression and performance skills
- young people to become more involved in their community

By early 2020, there were over 3000 Syrian individuals (New Scots) resettled in Scotland with over 200 settling in North Ayrshire. Working towards alleviating their social exclusion, the first stage of the programme specifically targeted socially isolated New Scots, enabling them to meet others in the same situation as themselves.

Working together helped create solid bonds and increase confidence before inviting their peers from the home community in to be a part of the groups.

The YDance artists are now supporting the young people to sensitively explore the themes of belonging, home, and identity with the aim of creating a dance film to be shown as part of the Scottish Refugee Festival in June 2023.

As ‘The New Scots Integration Strategy’ (2018-2022) reported, the media can portray refugees negatively, which impacts on receiving communities understanding and perception of who they are, resulting in racial harassment and intimidation. A larger consideration of this project is to change the conversation around migrants and, via an earlier intervention point at a younger age, support and promote the fact that young New Scots can be talented, positive, and proactive members of our society, in contrast to their portrayal by the general media.

#### References

1. Ginwright, Shawn A. (2022) *The Four Pivots: Reimagining justice, reimagining ourselves*, Huichin unceded Ohlone Land (aka Berekley California): North Atlantic Books

#### Info

YDance is the national dance organisation for children and young people in Scotland. It provides a range of dance opportunities across the country in rural and urban communities for children and young people aged 0-25years from diverse backgrounds and experiences. YDance exists to transform the lives of Scotland’s children and young people, supporting them to grow and learn through dance. We believe that every child in Scotland should have the opportunity to access exceptional dance opportunities to allow them to realise their potential as individuals through dance. The company is a Regularly Funded Organisation within Creative Scotland’s portfolio and has been supported by a range of other funds, including Scottish Government targeted funds, NHS Health Scotland, Cashback for Communities and trust funds, including the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Robertson Trust, for the last 35 years. Aligning with social justice, mental and physical health, inclusion and educational frameworks and policies, YDance has developed an educational, artist-led reflective dance methodology that ensures that dance empowers and transforms the lives of individuals and communities.

[www.ydance.org](http://www.ydance.org)