

Teachers' voices on *Fresh Moves*: A New Zealand regional primary school dance festival 21 years old.

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Abstract

An independent local regional initiative by the Bay of Plenty Dance organisation, created *Fresh Moves* Dance Festival that reached a twenty-year milestone in 2021. This research probes how has this festival supported teachers to engage with Dance in the New Zealand curriculum? The article specifically focuses on differing teachers' voices - delving into the achievements and the struggles from their varying viewpoints to help chronicle their part in the festival's journey through the years. It asks: The issues, challenges, and successes in participating in this festival over time from specific teachers' contexts will be unpacked and reflected upon. Findings offer insights into: how the festival plays an important role in supporting dance education within their school communities; and how a local initiative within dance can productively engage a school community in a way, that celebrates the creative spirit and this form of embodied learning.

Key words: Dance, Community, Education, Primary students, Festival, Creativity

Introduction

An independent local regional initiative by the Bay of Plenty Dance organisation (BOP Dance), created *Fresh Moves Dance Festival* that reached a twenty-year milestone in 2021. The festival is described as 'A celebration of original dance created by Bay of Plenty primary school students' (FMDF Manual, 2021, p. 1). The festival is for year three to year eight primary age students (seven- to twelve-year-olds). The length of the dance piece for each school is between five to seven minutes with dances based on the festival's theme, which changes each year. The festival is held annually in June at Baycourt Community and Arts Theatre, Tauranga, New Zealand. Surviving, and thriving, for over two decades, despite a somewhat arts-hostile education landscape, this festival has managed to achieve this celebratory milestone. Self-sustaining models of dance in the community in Aotearoa New Zealand are not easy to find, particularly those that can claim contributions to the community stretching over twenty years.

The festival has continued to thrive in the context of political upheavals. Challenges in the educational environment have meant the teaching profession has been systematically under-funded with teachers facing increased workloads. Coupled with this challenge, teachers have had to deal with continual change due to the regular introduction of new curricular initiatives (Cheesman, 2020; Thrupp, 2017; O'Connor, 2016). These changes include the nine years National Standards from 2007, regular curriculum refreshment, requirements for increasing documentation, a reduction in time to plan and prepare lessons, the loss of advisors, fiscal cutbacks and few professional development opportunities (Snook & Buck, 2014 b).

The research

This research aims to make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the growing field of community dance, contributing to the research literature on the ways that community dance addresses social justice issues, diversity, equity and inclusion, and addressing sustainability within these initiatives. This article forms part of a larger research inquiry that aims to chronicle the development of *Fresh Moves Dance Festival* over time, including the examination of how such an initiative has been sustained. This current portion of the research probes how this festival supported teachers to engage with dance in a New Zealand community setting. The article focuses specifically on three differing teachers' voices, delving into the achievements and struggles from their varying viewpoints to help chronicle their part in the festival's journey through the years. The research inquiry poses several key questions as follows: how has this festival made a difference within these three local communities? How has this festival empowered these teachers despite the substantial changes including neoliberal political drivers in education? How has the focus on creative dance with a different set theme each year played out?

I have worked for many years in dance teacher education, predominately at university level within the Bay of Plenty and Waikato regions of New Zealand. My connection to this festival has been as an expert panel member for Fresh Moves Festival for many years. Instead of judging, this panel of experts gives feedback and feed forward which includes celebrating the successes that the children bring to the stage through their dance-making ideas.

Background

Community dance is a contested term, and it is challenging to try and confine it to a single definition. However, Chris Thomson (2008) provides a useful platform for understanding the term, when stating that

Community dance is primarily a social activity, uniting creativity and physicality in a way that offers the experience of *communitas*, of solidarity and significance in an immediate and grounded way. It's in that experience of belonging and being valued that human beings flourish that we open up to learning and develop the ability to trust and be trusted (p. xi).

There are some other frameworks that can assist in developing understanding of the characteristics of community dance. A learning ecosystem provides one vantage point and in education involves 'the interdependent combinations of different species of providers and organisations playing different roles with learners in differing relationships to them over time and in varying mixes ... not at a 'system level' but a complex series of interlocking systems' (OECD 2015, p.17). The concept of a community performance is helpful for understanding the characteristics of the Fresh Moves Dance Festival. According to Koppers (2007) a community performance 'facilitates creative expression of a diverse group of people, for aims of self-expression and political change' (p.3). Furthermore, she believes that 'community performances are communally created and not individually authored' (p. 3) by a single choreographer or artist and asserts that the process is important in the work of creating together allowing different voices, bodies and experiences to merge (p.4.) Wise et.al (2020) agree that it is also important that inclusion was not achieved by a single leader mandating it, but through the behaviours of the entire group. Buck and

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Snook (2018) assert that 'dance in the twenty-first century appears to have moved its focus towards imagination, creativity and relationships, therefore leading to a place of broader access and inclusion' (p.44).

Research participants

Three teachers in schools located across the Bay of Plenty region in New Zealand were invited to take part in this research because of their long involvement in the festival. They are Barb Laing (Barb), a teacher in charge of performing arts at Omanu Primary, Rochelle Rhind (Rochelle) a specialist teacher in dance at Green Park Primary, and Ripeka Koia (Ripeka) a kaiako (teacher) at Te Kura O Te Paroa. Ripeka reflected that in 2005 she was attracted to *'the creativeness and travelling to Tauranga, being on a proper stage, giving an opportunity for kids to perform and to step outside our comfort zone into Creative dance, enhancing our Kapa Haka and meeting other kura'*. She expands *'It was mainly the experience of the stage life and we really wanted our kids to get out of their comfort zone and experience the theatre and all its trapping beyond our small rural school... an awesome opportunity for our kura to participate in'* For their part, Barb and Rochelle received an email from BOP dance about the festival that caught their attention resulting in their participation in the festival ever since 2005 and 2010 respectively.

Methodology

A qualitative research method aligns well with the focus on lived experience and interviews enable insight into individuals' perceptions, feelings and experiences of participating in the festival. The study therefore employed the use of in-depth semi-structured aural interviews around lived experience related to the Fresh Moves Dance festival. In the documenting of this research, it was deemed important to use interviewees' own words/voices as much as possible. Ethics approval was gained and all interviewees consented to be named. Furthermore, since I was the researcher, it was deemed important to maintain trust and respect built up over time especially since they were rightly so proud of their achievements. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted during the last months of 2021 with the three teachers Barb, Rochelle and Ripeka. Research questions were designed to probe participants' experiences in relation to Fresh Moves Dance festival and to elicit their insights. In addition to the overarching inquiry, more specific questions were developed by myself and sent to the interviewees prior to the interview.

In addition to the interviews the findings for this study were also informed by my personal observations and reflections based on my participation on the expert panel over many years. These recollections have informed the research process.

Questions were structured as a guide for the interviews. Analysis of the interview data using thematic coding revealed key findings which address the research questions posed and are discussed in the next section.



Baycourt Theatre (seats 582)

Findings and Discussion

Findings offer insights into how the festival plays an important role in supporting dance within the teachers' school communities. The teachers described their appreciation of the festival from different empowering perspectives. Barb explained that she delighted in seeing the children's growth in self-belief and the recognition of their skills.

When we do our rehearsals at school and the teachers who've taught the year 5/6 students over the previous year's come along and watch those children in dance, come out of their shells, and perform, and the enjoyment that they get from it. – they step up big time. Also I think it's partly because people believe in them....I think that's what I love the most, giving all children the opportunity to shine with dance, bringing out skills in everybody that often people don't see

Similarly, Rochelle revels in witnessing *'The joy on the kids' faces once they have actually achieved going right through the process of the Fresh moves and having them go on stage and perform their dance'*. For her part, Ripeka shared how participation in the festival impacted on what they did in the kura(school). They used, the Fresh Moves model to create their own extravaganzas and share with whanua (community) the telling of their own stories in relation to the theme. Ripeka explained that she was empowered by the reciprocal learning from the students and amongst the students, and shared that *'this complemented our kapa haka, it gave us kind of a leeway to explore more with dance within the school more freely expressing dance in another form other than kapa haka'*.

Overall, the findings showed agreement from the teachers that the festival offers unique opportunities to the children through:

- Opportunities to dance in a public platform- large theatre
- A sole focus on dance

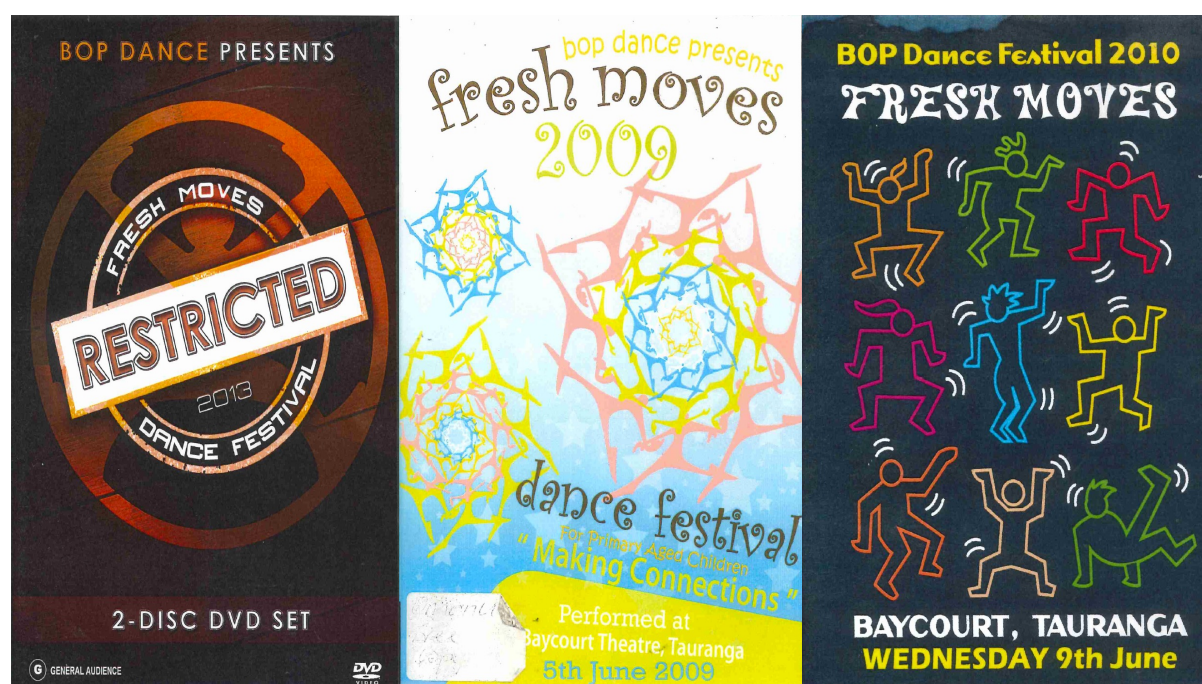
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- Allowing any child in their school to be involved. due to popular demand 2 schools with a larger roll have limited it to year five, six onwards and these schools have the maximum number of students (50) on stage each performance
- Open access to all with no auditions
- Opportunities for many children to be engaged in an experience that they wouldn't normally have.

The festival has had a knock-on effect in each school year after year with students seeing others' involvement and subsequently wanting to be part of the process, ending in their performance at Fresh Moves Dance Festival. Despite the everchanging educational landscape, this festival seems to be able to maintain its momentum. Each year, both teachers and students from these three schools continue to build their experience and confidence.

Festival themes

Prior to the festival performance date(s), students, supported by their teachers, create and rehearse their five to seven minutes dance piece around the particular theme for that year. Examples of themes over the years include Flipside, Kaleidoscope, Move that thought, Restricted, Making Connections and recently, 20 years Fresh Take.



Each night sees a diverse range of interpretations of the theme through the dance. The value of seeing different interpretations captured year on year is reflected in the following comments from Barb then Ripeka:

- *'it was like a comparison of the same idea but with different offshoots from it'*
- *'-seeing the different interpretations of the theme gives a wide perspective'*

All three teachers value having a theme interpreted from slightly different perspectives. Barb comments enthusiastically: *'I think the theme was a great idea*

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and essential because it gave you something to work towards', whereas Rochelle takes a slightly different tack:

the theme is really wide and is a good challenge for the students to begin with a brainstorm... I think it's the hardest thing for the kids to get the head around. ... We grapple with how we can integrate the theme their own way and she adds we didn't have to have one kind of dance genre which is good.

Ripeka agrees '*We love the themes. It helps us to think deeply about things or issues that pertain to the theme. Narrows everything down.*' The notion that participants use the themes to explore and express ideas or issues that are important such as pollution, computer usage, and Covid 19 has been commented on previously (Cheesman, 2022).

Ripeka's comments in this regard bring a cultural lens to the way in which the students create and express meaning through dance. She comments that:

it is an opportunity to intertwine our culture with the mainstream. Use the theme to tell our stories for example, no to deep sea oil drilling, no to pollution (the Reina) from a Māori perspective so that our Whanau (extended family) could read it and understand the statements being made through dance.

The comments offered by the teachers provide evidence that the different themes encourage students to process a diverse range of ideas in order to make them meaningful statements through dance.

Working process: focus on student choreography

One of the unique features of the festival is that students lead the choreographic process, a point emphasised in the 2021 manual. Interviewees commented on their impressions of student choreography. Barb noted that '*they start off with nothing and end up with something that they can share, and show... their input is so creative and so amazing because it's so fresh*'. All three teachers value engagement in the collaborative dance-making process which they have honed over the years sharing their agency with the students. Barb explains that, '*They create an inclusive learning environment that encourages participation and empowerment. They have been allowed to do their own thing as opposed to being told to point your toe here lift your leg there throw your hand up here*'. This way of working challenges the traditional notion of dance teaching which follows a transmission model (I demonstrate, you copy). As I reflect on these comments, I suggest that student voice is evident through the development of student agency in the whole process of dance-making. In this way, students are empowered to take an active role, assume ownership and have a say in things that are important to them. Finally, and as a culmination of all these factors, the process builds respect and a sense of self-worth, accompanied by a feeling of ownership of the process and the dance they have created. Furthermore, working towards a performance of their own choreographic endeavours builds a sense of community.

The participants all provided insights into the choreographic process, with each teacher highlighting how they work with students and emphasising different aspects. Rochelle explains that:

We always start off with just paper out on the floor and they all brainstorm any sort of words that come into the head about that theme. And then we'll put them all up on the wall and we'll start narrowing it down... gradually eliminating ideas. And then from there we think, is it going to be: a really strong storyline? Just movements to do with that theme? What sort of music are we going to use? What messages do we want to come across to the audience? . . . I'm always using the dance elements.' She summarises the process by reflecting that 'the students do it themselves and I just sort of joined all the different bits together for them to give them that guidance... owning that dance themselves.

The process for Ripeka is slightly different in that the teachers involved firstly brainstorm ideas around the theme. '*With all the students interested we had to explain that fresh moves creative dance and it's a little bit different to haka, and you can do whatever you want to do with it*'. Ripeka explained that her next step would be a collaborative discussion of all the ideas with students and deciding on which ones to experiment with. Students would be encouraged to develop movement vocabulary from their ideas and to question how they can use kapa haka and extend on some of the movements to suit the theme. Then they progress to adding other movements that help express the theme. The result is the students develop a range of movement ideas.

Barb expands on the important non-competitive ethos to encourage maximum participation in this festival: '*it doesn't mean you don't have high expectations of them. Just means that they're not having to compete, and everyone can be part of it*'. In explaining the importance of having all of them on stage for the entire time she says '*because that's what they're there for. They're not there to just pop on for a minute or two to do the little bit and then disappear, they've got to be highlighted for that full time because otherwise what's the point of being there*'. They are not having to listen to adults, but rather being able to highlight and articulate their own power. Social justice can be seen in the provision of opportunities for a wide range of children to dance in a public setting where this has not existed before and in empowering students to be proud of their successes.

Rochelle comments on: '*The growth in the children confidence wise, working with other children they probably wouldn't normally work with, communication, preparation, working together*'. Clearly, maximising the time on stage provides opportunities that are not available in mainstream education. In addition, children are able to embody their values, their hopes and dreams in a creative aesthetic which speaks to the whole community. The collaboration, community, and richness of the process that the teachers discuss aligns with Chappell and Hathaway's (2019) description of a communal undertaking:

. . . creativity which minds others, that does not focus on the individual forging on without care for the communal undertaking, but which heralds individual breakthroughs alongside group triumphs; it features the embodied and emergent as well as the spoken and articulated; it nods to the familial with all that that implies; it recognises the

importance of discipline knowledge and conflict, the productive and unproductive, the emotional aspects of creative process, empathy, reciprocity, flattening hierarchies, shared responsibilities, and functions within 'bottom up', overlapping cultures. It is complicated and untidy, but this is surely what it is to be human (p. 2).

All three teachers refer to the creative process as risk taking, stepping outside the square, collaborating, decision making, feedback from other students, trial and error, experimenting with ways to develop the dance with the encouragement of all ideas. The use of dance elements, choreographic devices and structures are also part of the process. Chappell (2011) talks about humanising creativity, 'which encourages empathy, shared ownership and an emotional journey ... a process of change and becoming' (p.5).

All three teachers stated that creating and performing the dance demonstrated inclusive practice in many different ways. These can be summarised as follows:

- There are no auditions
- Children's input and creative ideas are celebrated
- Children with diverse learning needs can shine in this endeavour
- Skills in everyone that people do not often see can be brought out - A non-verbal form of communication is celebrated
- Children from diverse backgrounds are involved and dance can provide an opportunity to democratise a process
- A doorway is opened up for children to succeed
- Diversity of excellence is a goal
- Ideas are expressed through the smart physical body
- The process is non-competitive
- Community is activated and activated through attendance at performances.
- Most performers are on stage for the entire seven minutes to maximise participation

This potential of community dance to nurture inclusivity has been commented on by Wise et al. (2020) who state that '*The practices of inclusivity, supporting participation and empowering groups of people all need to be learned and the community dance environment may be the environment in which people can learn them*' (p.383). These practices help to foster meaningful connections and relationships and help democratise the process. Reciprocity in the exchange of knowledge is maximized and teacher imposition is minimized in this dance context.

The use of a panel of experts as opposed to judges enhances the non-competitive dimension and facilitates the maximum participation that the teachers applauded. The panel gives feedback both live and written and can celebrate the successes that the children brought to the stage through their dancing. The invited expert panel members are tasked with giving live feedback after each school's performance. In undertaking this role over many years, on the performance night I am always aware of the many ears eagerly waiting to hear what the expert panel have to say about their dance. For me it's a privilege to do so. It is a skill and I feel the responsibility to give very positive comments, and to make sure that I am celebrating the dance and noticing things in a way that people can relate to. I use dance vocabulary that in my view is extending the audience's and performers' dance viewing knowledge. I

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describe this process as integral to inclusive ways of working and the passion and support from audiences/parents are seen as key to success. Participation is celebrated as achievement, creating a positive ethos in contrast to deficit models seen in some traditional festivals. All three teachers spoke about the value of comments to the audience and children who eagerly await what is to be said about their performance. For me, it has been a very empowering, vibrant, and delightful experience to witness scores of children performing on a big stage dancing their own interpretation of a theme to a full theatre. At the conclusion of the show, all schools are presented with a merit certificate in front of the full house. Certificates are decided and presented by the expert panel for aspects of the dance that were highly commended such as choreography, performance, realisation of the theme, along with a comments sheet from each expert about their dance. Additionally, all students receive a participation certificate to keep as a souvenir. The certificates that are presented coupled with written feedback all contribute to demonstrating an inclusive approach.

Teachers talk about the magic of performing in a theatre and being part of this festival. Hundreds of children have had the opportunity to perform on Baycourt stage that may never have had that possibility otherwise. As Rochelle says, *'it's a fantastic scene. Their achievement and growth'* The house is full each night with extended family and friends who are keen to see the performers and each school's interpretation of the theme.

Challenges over time

There have been challenges to the festival in an educational climate of constant change. In the interviews, the teachers shared their perceptions of the impact of educational changes. Barb makes an astute point that *'participation in the festival does depend on the staffing in the school and how keen they are'*. Further to this she raises the issue of time:

I think the biggest problem is finding the time for it, for us we have to do all our rehearsals, out of school time so we do it prior to school in the morning. And then we manage to crib a little bit of school time towards the end when we need a bit more, and for dress rehearsal, so I think time is the biggest issue.

Ripeka remembered that BOP ran workshops that introduced the theme and facilitated teachers in the dance-making process. These were unable to be sustained due to lack of uptake despite the BOP dance initiative of offering to pay teacher release for the workshop. It can be argued that the reasons for this were limited time in an overcrowded school day and the low priority given to dance due to pressures of national standards (Cheesman, 2022).

Boys' participation

It is frequently asked why there are few or no boys in a performance. The underlying issues this question raises are complicated, particularly in Western concert dance where gender is foregrounded, and dance is seen as a feminine activity. As Risner (2007) observes, the school environment often reproduces gendered stereotypes

that privilege independence, competition, strength, and being stoic, all in keeping with traditional Western notions of masculinity. When asked about boys' participation, Rochelle commented that it was not about gender but more associated with the competing array of activities at lunchtimes for boys when rehearsals were mainly placed. For the majority of boys their choice was they wanted to play outside with mates at lunchtime. One year she had her sporty son involved and this encouraged more boys as he invited others to join and the next year, she had more boys participating indicating the power of seeing and being with other boys in dance. As noted by Steinberg and Steinberg (2016), *'Collaborating with familiar partners, in addition to providing assistance in learning to make decisions can provide a safe space to be independent and imaginative, and ultimately creates more meaningful experiences'* (p. 3). Barb commented on the same issue, noting that if she had covered a term of dance prior to beginning rehearsals she had more boys in the piece. Another aspect that Barb noted was that with the boys she did not have to deal with perceived dance ideas from private dance lessons meaning that the boys were often far more creative. In contrast to the usually didactic approach taken in private dance lessons her pedagogy aligns with the following *'...to make boys feel safe and comfortable by actively engaging them through thinking and applying their ideas more freely in choreographic opportunities'* (Risner, 2014).

COVID19 resulted in the cancellation of the festival in 2019 and all three teachers missed being part of the festival that year but returned with gusto the following year. This festival and the organisation behind it seemed adept at avoiding the storms, or perhaps the event went under the radar, being local. Despite these difficult times this local community festival has continued to be supported by these schools, returning to perform with sustained passion and commitment by students and teachers year after year contributing to this festival's longevity.

The future

There is a legacy evolving because some students who were in Fresh Moves as primary students are now dancing in secondary schools taking NCEA Dance and some are training to be teachers. They all remember sitting on the side of the stage watching the guest secondary performers. Past performers return to be helpers. This festival has a large outreach to parents, family, whanau and the wider community of the Bay of Plenty. It is a public forum for positive reinforcement from teachers, senior leadership in schools, parents and siblings who would not otherwise see the students dance. A recent initiative might strengthen the foundation that participation in the festival establishes for students. The organising committee has introduced that on the day of the performance all participating students are gifted a class with a professional dancer or group in the theatre. This is proving to be very successful.

Conclusion

It is argued that this festival has, through these teachers and schools' participation over the years, had impact in several ways, including giving agency to the children within the choreographic process, and providing opportunities for all students to participate through an adherence to inclusion through the process and performance. The teachers share their agency with the students by engaging them in a collaborative decision-making process. They create an environment that is a space

conducive to promoting inclusion, participation and empowerment performing in a large theatre to parents and the wider community. The tangible joy and accomplishment of the performers is in full view each night. The audience sees the communication of ideas through movement which is different for many people. The vibrancy of the occasion cannot be underestimated along with the opportunities for students to shine, take on leadership roles and have agency. The community members clearly see value in this festival by supporting it over the years despite the turbulent climate not at all conducive to dance.

It can be argued that this festival has kept dance education alive and thriving in these schools that take part, despite the many pressures and changes that have created challenges within the education sector.

The endurance of the festival demonstrates the power of its aesthetic and social contribution to the community and beyond. Insights from four different voices into how a local initiative within dance has productively engaged several communities over time celebrates the creative spirit and this embodied way of knowing.

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Biography

Sue is an educator, choreographer, and researcher in dance. She has worked both in New Zealand and England over many years contributing to the development of dance education both at university and community levels. A Senior Lecturer in Dance Education, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand for 19 years, she is heading the development of dance education teacher trainees' courses. Her research has focussed on critical dance pedagogy in education, dance and disability and her applied choreographic practice particularly in relation to site-specific work. Publications are within the following: *Teachers and Curriculum*, *Dance Research Aotearoa*, *Research in Dance Education*, *Research in Dance Education* plus several edited collections such as *Dance, Access, and Inclusion*. She is also a teacher of a community dance class for Touch Compass Disability Lead Dance company for 14 years- on going.

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