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Fresh Moves Dance Festival

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FRESH MOVES DANCE FESTIVAL

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Introduction

Fresh Moves Dance Festival is an independent local initiative held in the Bay of Plenty region of New Zealand. In 2021 Fresh Moves reached a 20-year milestone. Part of a larger research inquiry which chronicles the festival's journey through the years and seeks to understand how such an initiative has been sustained over time, this article presents a snapshot of the initiative. This snapshot describes some of the history, successes, challenges and plans for future development of this initiative. As a dance educator, observer and member of the expert panel of Fresh Moves Dance Festival, I find the festival provides much food for thought about our own practice and community connections through dance education.

What is the Fresh Moves Dance Festival?

The festival is described in the Fresh Moves Dance guidelines as “a celebration of original dance created by Bay of Plenty primary school students” (Fresh Moves Manual, 2021). Started by the Bay of Plenty Dance Educators network (BOP Dance), the festival plays an important role in supporting dance education in the region. The dance festival has empowered participants and survived substantial changes, including political upheavals in education. Primary school children in Years 3–8 (c. 7– to 12–year-olds) perform in the festival, which is held annually in June at Baycourt Community and Arts Centre, Tauranga. Dances are based on a different festival theme each year and are between five to seven minutes in duration. Thirty schools from Opotiki to Katikati, and Paengaroa to Oropi have taken part in the festival over the years with at least six different schools performing in each of the two nights. The first festival date recorded was June 2002 with 11 primary schools participating.

How did it start?

The time was right. Education in Aotearoa New Zealand went through a major change in 2000 with the introduction of a full and varied national curriculum. Dance is recognised as a specific discipline in its own right and was included as one of the four disciplines in the learning area called The Arts (Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum, 2000). Dance education is compulsory in the New Zealand Curriculum from year one to year five. The first few years of using this new curriculum were considered by some arts educators as “golden” years or (at least) a few years “in the sun” for dance. Polly Thin-Rabb was a dance advisor for the Bay of Plenty region on one of six nationwide Ministry of Education contracts set up to deliver professional development in the arts. Polly Thin-Rabb remarked that “there were very few opportunities for children to perform in relation to dance ... There were things like Jump jam or private studio competitions, but not as far as the dance curriculum and children being able to share their learning with a wider audience and perform in a large public space” (personal communication, October 13, 2021). A lack of opportunity for children to experience dance in a proscenium arch theatre context was identified. Planning started on the provision of community performances which could challenge this status quo (Kuppers, 2007) and Fresh Moves Dance Festival was founded.

Celebrating choreography and interpretation

Each night of the festival offers a diverse range of interpretations of a unique theme through dance. It is important to note that the 2021 manual emphasises that students are to lead the choreographic process

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(Fresh Moves Dance Manual, 2021). Student participants and their teacher(s) are encouraged to interpret the theme from their diverse perspectives, often using the theme to make a statement through dance about current issues that are important to them – for example pollution, computer usage and COVID-19. Before each dance is performed, a student from each school introduces their interpretation of the dance theme and the title of their piece.

Teachers who have taken part in the festival over several years have honed a collaborative process in which they share their agency with the students by engaging in a collective making process (Chappell, 2011). Part of Fresh Moves for many years, Barb Laing, a teacher from Omanu Primary school supported her students to create dance works and create an inclusive learning environment that encourages participation and celebration. It can be argued that working towards a performance of the children's own choreographic endeavours builds a sense of community for children within the school, their whānau and the region.

Participation, inclusion and empowerment

A further principal aim of the festival is to celebrate inclusion and diversity. The festival encourages all primary age children to participate, including boys, girls, Māori, Pākehā, Pasifika, and children with a variety of learning needs, who all have agency to bring their cultural and dance knowledge to the performances. The provision of opportunities for a wide range of children from diverse backgrounds to dance in a public platform where this has not existed before may be seen as democratising the process of performing in dance (Cone, 2007). According to Barb Laing, “Giving all children the opportunity to shine with dance bringing out skills in everybody that often people don't see” (personal communication, October 12, 2021).

Maximum participation in the festival is encouraged through a non-competitive ethos. Instead of judges the organisers set up a panel of experts, who gave feedback and were able to celebrate the successes that the children brought to the stage through their dancing. Integral to this non-competitive kaupapa, or aim, inclusive ways of working, passion and support from audiences inclusive of family, friends, the school and wider community are seen as keys to success. Participation itself is celebrated as the achievement, creating a positive ethos that contrasts other competitive models seen in some festivals in which winning is success.

Strong, consistent team leadership

Much of the success of the Fresh Moves Dance Festival is clearly due to the drive and uncompromising belief in the festival by the organiser, whose role is pivotally supported by a small, passionate committee. The logistics of managing a large number of very excited primary children, on the day of rehearsal and the evening performance, have been honed over years of experience, with many of the volunteer backstage helpers returning year after year.

Sharing

Part of the Fresh Moves Dance Festival successful kaupapa is the notion of sharing. This is seen in three contexts. Firstly, sharing with the participant teachers. This includes the demystifying of the theatre space and the logistics of the performance, and the sharing of ideas to support the choreographic process and structuring of the dance. Secondly, at the end of their festival night, primary children view secondary student performers dance on stage, encouraging positive interaction and seeding aspirations to continue into secondary school dance. A third example of sharing takes place between the expert panel and the audience, as comments from the expert panel are shared with those in the theatre, both performers and audience, to strengthen the appreciation of the choreography, the realisation of the theme through dance and the performance. Acting as a member of this expert panel for many years has allowed me insight into this festival.

Challenges

Interest and availability of teachers for the festival has fluctuated over time and the ramifications of this were that sustaining three nights became unworkable. I suggest that this can likely be attributed to

teachers dealing with constant change brought about by continuing introduction of new initiatives around curriculum and nine years of National Standards (Snook & Buck, 2014; O'Connor, 2016; Thrupp, 2017). Workshops originally held to support teachers in their facilitation of the dance process were not sustained due to lack of uptake, even despite the BOP Dance initiative in paying teacher release for workshops. It can be argued that the reasons for declining uptake were limited time in an overcrowded school day, and low priority given to dance due to pressures of National Standards.

In 2020 the festival was cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions on gatherings. It is still unclear what the ramifications for the festival are going forward in the uncertainty of a pandemic. However, interest and enthusiasm for participation in the event does not appear to have diminished, as despite 2020 with no festival, there was enough renewed interest from schools in 2021 to sustain two nights of performance.

Concluding thoughts

Grown from grassroot efforts, the success of this festival is largely due to the drive and commitment of the group of dedicated locals, mainly teachers, who give freely of their time to run the festival and continue to have the passion to make it work over all these years. Of note is that this group still has ownership of the Fresh Moves Dance Festival to this day. Despite difficult times recently, this local community festival has been supported by schools returning to perform and new schools being programmed, indicating the sustained passion and commitment of students and teachers to be part of this Fresh Moves Dance festival year after year. The dedication and commitment to the festival from the organiser and the committee all contribute to this festival's longevity. This festival and organisation behind it seemed adept at responding to challenges. As a local initiative the Fresh Moves Dance Festival has become self-sustaining and a real beacon of hope and achievement in dance and arts education over the years.

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