

# **Joining in the dance: What can be learned from high self-efficacy teachers about teaching dance?**

**Suzanne Renner and David Bell**

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## **Abstract**

Primary teachers in New Zealand schools are required to teach dance education as part of a balanced classroom programme. This responsibility requires that teachers have positive beliefs about their own competence and capabilities to teach dance to achieve desired outcomes for their students. This article presents qualitative findings from a mixed-methods study which investigated teachers' self-efficacy beliefs for teaching dance education. Seventeen teachers participated in interviews that explored their high self-efficacy beliefs in light of their dance teaching experiences. Findings revealed that teachers' beliefs in their own pedagogical capabilities, the value of dance, and supportive relationships with students motivated their dance teaching and gave personal satisfaction.

## **Introduction**

Self-efficacy beliefs can affect how teachers think, feel and behave (Bandura, 1997) and therefore have the potential to influence teaching and learning in dance as an arts discipline in primary classrooms. This article addresses the issue of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs for teaching dance in New Zealand primary schools. It draws on a mixed-methods research study in which a questionnaire survey with 140 generalist teachers was followed by individual interviews with a subset group of 17 teachers (see Renner, 2015). Each of the interviewed teachers was evaluated as having high self-efficacy beliefs for teaching dance according to the results of an adapted self-efficacy scale (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) used in the questionnaire. This article presents the context and rationale for the overall study, a brief description of the interview methodology, interview data findings under inductive and deductive themes, a discussion of the findings, and ideas for teacher education.

## **Context literature and rationale**

All students in New Zealand schools should have an arts education that enables them to develop skills and knowledge in a range of dance genres and activity contexts (Ministry of Education, 2000, 2007). Realisation of the potential for dance to contribute to and enhance students' holistic development and life-long learning in primary classrooms is not necessarily assured, however. Generalist teachers can approach dance with a variety of anxieties and challenges (Beals, Cameron, Hipkins, & Watson, 2003; Buck, 2003; McGee et al., 2004; Snook, 2012). If teachers lack confidence in their own competence and capabilities to teach dance, they may feel reluctant or unable to provide relevant learning experiences and meaningful models for students and the emerging teachers they mentor. In the face of continual changes and pressures in education that could challenge teachers' ability to deliver a balanced classroom programme (Ell, 2011; McGee & Fraser, 2008), it was considered timely to investigate the state of teachers' confidence, competence, and practices for teaching dance now that it should be a customary part of their job.

## **Self-efficacy beliefs**

Research has found that teachers' beliefs about their competence (i.e., self-efficacy beliefs) to teach in various curriculum areas can contribute to the success or difficulties that they experience in the classroom (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). As future-oriented beliefs, they can affect teachers' motivation, emotions, and expectations, their decision making and responses to challenges. For example, teachers with positive or high self-efficacy beliefs are more willing than their counterparts to try new ideas and approaches, be more relaxed about classroom control to promote student autonomy, be resilient to challenges, and be more enthusiastic in their job (Allinder, 1994; Guskey, 1988; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998).

Self-efficacy beliefs are constantly being developed through the mental processing of information from mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social/verbal persuasion, and physiological/emotional arousal (Bandura, 1997). In teaching contexts, teachers' mastery experiences and perceptions of their work with students can be expected to provide the strongest evidence of their efficacy or abilities. Their self-efficacy beliefs

will also be informed in varying degrees by the feelings and responses generated from watching others demonstrate the desired teaching tasks or behaviours, positive or negative appraisals from colleagues, students, or parents, and anticipation of classroom responsibilities. That is, the nature and strength of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs for teaching dance will depend on how they have interpreted and integrated the information from their past experiences or expectations of dance teaching, and the context within which they work.

### **Dance education challenges for teachers**

With the publication of *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2000), it was not surprising to find that teachers were concerned about their confidence, capabilities, and capacities for teaching dance as an arts discipline. To fulfil the vision of a broad dance education, teachers needed to have dance knowledge and skills across a variety of dance cultures and use diverse pedagogies (Hong, 2002; Ministry of Education, 2000, 2007). In arts professional development programmes that followed the introduction of the curriculum, primary teachers' dance confidence was consistently lower than for the other arts disciplines, which they attributed to a lack of personal dance experience, limited professional development, time and resources, student attitudes, and colleagues' views that dance was not important (Beals et al., 2003; Education Review Office, 2003; McGee et al., 2004). Limited understanding and a lack of skills across a variety of dance genres or styles caused teachers to feel unable to cater to diverse students' dance interests or strengths (Ashley, 2010). Teachers who lacked experience in dance were either apprehensive, or welcomed the expectation of facilitating students' creativity through exploration and problem-solving processes, depending on their abilities to develop students' ideas beyond initial generation (Buck, 2003; Fraser et al., 2007).

Research has also shown that factors such as students' age, gender, cultural background, abilities and behaviour can affect teachers' dance confidence and pedagogy. Anticipations that students would have negative attitudes, be excitable, noisy or unruly, be lacking in creativity, or better at dance than the teacher were explanations for anxiety or caution towards teaching dance (Buck, 2003; McGee et al., 2004; Snook, 2012). The prospect of

having to dance or demonstrate movements could make teachers feel self-conscious about their own bodies and physical skills, thereby affecting their choice of teaching approaches and dance activities (Ashley, 2010; Buck, 2003). Together with increasing demands on teachers that have created time pressures in the delivery of arts education (Ashley, 2010; Beals et al., 2003; Buck, 2003; McGee et al., 2004), teachers may be persuaded to integrate dance with other curriculum areas rather than to teach it as a stand-alone subject, raising questions about the ongoing development of teachers' self-efficacy.

## **Method**

Interviews were carried out to gain some insight into, and explanation of, teachers' self-efficacy beliefs for teaching dance. The participants were 13 female and 4 male teachers from 12 urban primary schools who had completed the initial questionnaire and volunteered to be interviewed. Collectively, they taught across the range of Years 1–8 classes in decile 2–10 schools and had 1–30-plus years of teaching experience (teachers in their first year of teaching were not included in this study). Eleven participants remembered experiencing some dance in their initial teacher education (ITE), and 14 participants had had some form of dance professional development.

The results from the survey questionnaire provided some prompts for the semi-structured interview, which required the teachers to reflect on their dance attitudes, beliefs, and background, and past dance teaching experiences. The time and place for the interview were negotiated with each participant and lasted 45–90 minutes. After the transcription of each interview, a printed copy was sent to the participant so that he or she could check for accuracy of recording, clarify meaning, or delete information to protect anonymity.

A pragmatist foundation for this mixed-methods study meant that qualitative data were analysed inductively (locating principal themes within the broader data) and deductively (analysing evidence against a priori categories) (see Renner, 2015). Inductive analysis enabled themes to arise from across the data that might otherwise have gone unnoticed,

whereas deductive analysis put a focus on specific factors related to teaching dance and to the teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. Findings are reported under inductive and deductive themes, with illustrative quotations from participants. The quotations are coded by teacher gender (M or F) and interview transcript number (1–17).

## **Inductive themes**

Inductive analysis identified a similar number of comments under two main themes: teachers' beliefs and perceptions, and music. The comments showed that mastery experiences of dance had given the participants some clear views about what dance meant to them and/or for their students, and what was required to teach it. They also reflected on how and why music was important to their own or their students' success.

### **Teachers' beliefs and perceptions about dance and dance teaching**

For the participants, dance as a teaching and learning context was one in which they and the students could experience some challenge, freedom, and enjoyment. Through dance, the students were able to exercise their need to move and to engage their senses in an inclusive environment that also allowed them to express their individual creativity and feelings. Dance experiences helped students to develop a range of transferable physical, social, and cognitive competencies, and to integrate knowledge from other curriculum areas. Students' dance engagement and achievement were sources of pleasure for participants: "I love watching the children express themselves. If you just stand back and watch what they come up with, it's quite amazing" (F10).

The participants thought that making dance lessons enjoyable and interesting was important to ensure that all children were motivated and at ease with exploring and being expressive in movement. Along with needing knowledge about dance and general pedagogical skills, the participants felt that they needed to be positive, responsive, creative, and enthusiastic role models for dance. Their physical involvement was seen as a way of supporting the students and for showing that dance was valuable. As one participant said:

If you get up there and do it for them it's amazing what you're communicating to the boys. You're communicating that it's acceptable. It might even be a bit cool and you know, even if it's me, those sort of things are important. (M4)

But teaching dance also had the potential to make participants feel nervous, afraid to make mistakes or prepared to be laughed at. Several participants had images of themselves in dance as perhaps looking like a “dick” (M1), a “fool” (F9, F12, M4), a “pillow” (F12), a “banana” (F6), or a “clown” (F5). Despite the risk of not being seen as dance experts, these participants persevered with their efforts to encourage their students and to show that dancing could be fun.

Participants who mentioned how and when dance was taught varied in how much time could be given. Teachers of young students felt more able to teach in “10 minute snippets” (F9); whereas, a teacher of Year 6 students thought that:

You might be able to do story writing in half an hour or reading in half an hour but I feel that when you're doing dance, you're taking three-quarters of an hour to an hour to do it properly ... You've got to keep that creative thing going, otherwise you sort of lose momentum (F7).

Linking dance with other curriculum areas, rather than teaching it as an isolated subject, was preferred by nine participants for enhancing students' accessibility and achievement.

### **Importance of music**

As an accompaniment or creative stimulus for dance, music was an important consideration in dance teaching. Participants' own knowledge and enjoyment of music, and of moving to it contributed to feelings of confidence and competence for teaching dance. For seven participants, finding the right music for dance lessons was essential: “Music is hugely important because it could make or break it [teaching dance] ... definitely for me, it's music first” (F13). In some classrooms, free dancing to music was used for promoting fitness or as a break from routine. At other times, developing the students' skills and knowledge of dance and music relationships was a teaching focus.

Participants who were leaders for school dance programmes or productions collaborated with other staff or students to choose and explore the possibilities of music for dance. Choosing suitable music for dance, however, required time, access to resources, and a consideration of what was fitting for the students and dance objectives. For example, one participant felt that popular culture music could stifle students' creativity, whereas songs with action lyrics could encourage the inclusion of students who needed more direction. A dilemma could arise, though, when students' interest in music videos and the adult dance images challenged notions of what was appropriate:

Yeah, it's hard, because they've seen it and they think ... that's what dance is and that's a worry ... I don't want to teach something and have a parent come in and say "Why on earth are you doing this?" (F5)

## **Deductive themes**

The deductive findings relate to those that were obtained from looking at the interview responses from the perspective of two self-efficacy factors. The two factors emerged from analysis of the self-efficacy scale results obtained from the questionnaire and were labelled: efficacy for student engagement and instructional strategies (Engage/Instruct), and efficacy for classroom management (Manage). These factors and their component items are used as guides for examining the transcripts and for reporting the data (see Renner, 2015).

Deductive analysis of the interview data produced some findings in common with the inductive analysis. Looking at the data through the lens of self-efficacy in student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management, however, helped to bring more focus to teachers' perceived efficacy in particular aspects of pedagogy. Although all participants had high self-efficacy beliefs for teaching dance and there was agreement as to what seemed to work in their classes or with their students, there were still individual concerns about their ability to deal with some situations or to teach some dance skills.

### **Efficacy for student management and instructional strategies**

Under this theme, the participants' transcripts were examined for statements or judgements about their ability to engage, motivate and instruct students

in dance. For example, responses were examined for mention of the ways that the teachers fostered students' creativity and critical thinking in dance, the kinds of teaching and assessment strategies they used, and the means by which they accommodated or responded to student differences.

Deductive analysis confirmed inductive findings of the importance of fun, inclusion and risk-taking in the dance teaching environment. Participants mentioned that having a good rapport with the students, and appreciating their differences and interests, helped to engage the students in dance. In some classes, this meant gentle scaffolding of the teaching progressions so that students could be involved in ways that were comfortable for them. Participants were also willing to dance with the students, showing that mistakes could be made in dance or that there was reciprocal enjoyment. When participants were limited in what they could demonstrate or wanted to motivate student creativity, they used student peer models or exploration processes for generating movement examples. As one participant went on to explain:

If it was folk dancing or doing the dancing for a set product, yes ... I would show them or model it. But in creative dance I tend not to because I don't want them to copy my ideas ... it closes their mind to just this must be how she wants it. (F11)

Although the participants were generally positive about students' responses to dance, they did acknowledge that there were occasions when one or more students did not want to participate. In these circumstances, participants either allowed students to observe and make their way into dance in their own time or found out what might stimulate these students' interest. A more radical solution for some participants was to avoid using the word *dance*:

If you call it dance, you'll turn them off straight away ... particularly with boys ... I don't call it anything. We just go and enjoy ourselves ... at the end of it they'll tell me what they've been doing ... that is the beginning point of getting through the obstacle of what dance is. (M3)

Although the participants were confident about knowing how to motivate and engage their students in dance, there were some concerns about the range of their subject knowledge and own creativity, which affected their

understanding of achievement progressions or ability to extend students. As a teacher of Year 2 students commented: “I look at our senior girls and I think wow, I couldn’t do that and I think that might frighten me” (F1). Gaps in the participants’ dance knowledge were sometimes overcome by having students copy or make movement interpretations of what they saw in a dance video; otherwise, a specialist dance teacher from the community was employed temporarily.

Few participants worked in schools in which students’ dance achievement was formally assessed and reported. Self- and peer-assessment practices were common. For the participants, noticing students’ enjoyment in dance was as important as, or more important than, making achievement judgements, especially when they were uncertain about what to be looking for: “There’s a whole host of things that you could assess, it’s hard to nail it down. You’d have to pick something I guess” (F1).

### **Efficacy for classroom management**

Under this theme, interview transcripts were examined for participants’ comments and competence judgements relating to managing students in dance. References to aspects such as managing behaviour, classroom organisation, routines, rules and expectations in dance, and dealing with disruptions were of interest. The findings from the interview data supported the quantitative results from the questionnaire that showed the participants had higher self-efficacy for management in dance than for student engagement and instruction.

None of the interview participants had major concerns about their abilities to manage students in dance, but they agreed that there needed to be some anticipation of what could be problematic. To ensure that dance teaching was enjoyable and effective for learning, there needed to be good class management, a planned approach for effective teaching strategies, and high expectations for behaviour. As one teacher put it:

It’s not sedentary by nature, it’s not calm, it’s not quiet but there are points when you need to calm them ... it’s knowing when to call on your behaviour management skills to get that and then off you go again. (M4)

A reason put forward by one participant for why students could get excited and create behaviour issues when participating in dance was that it was

not taught as regularly as some other teaching subjects where students became familiar with teaching and learning routines. Six other participants raised the situation of moving a class from the classroom to a space like a hall, which could predispose some students to behave in a distracted or unsafe manner, necessitating firm behaviour boundaries and management strategies. Good management, however, was “not about being a dictator and a disciplinarian” (F12), but that which gave students “controlled freedom” (F7), so that they could learn to be self-managing in dance. As dance could change the mood and energy within a classroom, two participants found it useful as a management strategy in itself to transition young students.

## **Discussion**

The findings of the inductive and deductive analyses of interview data shed light on the participants’ experiences of teaching dance in the arts curriculum and helped to explain their high self-efficacy beliefs. Participating teachers’ responses showed the mixture of beliefs that can be contained within their sense of self-efficacy. Their mastery experiences confirmed that there were still challenges for teaching dance, but that the effect of these could be modified by a positive attitude, belief in the value of dance education, confidence in their pedagogical skills, and effective relationships with students. To motivate and engage students in dance, the participants modelled their own enjoyment of dance; were prepared to be open to, and learn from, students’ ideas; to dance alongside them; and to provide a learning environment that supported students’ expressions of individuality. Weaknesses in dance-specific knowledge or skills could be overcome by teaching approaches that gave students opportunities to contribute their own skills or ideas for their peers to follow.

As a form of social and verbal persuasion, students’ potential or actual responses to dance affected the participants’ sense of self-efficacy. The students’ enjoyment of movement and dance was a powerful factor that gave continued motivation to teach it. In the case of reluctant students, participants were confident that they dealt with them in a positive and productive manner. Potential management issues could be mitigated by planning and strategies that still allowed room for student enjoyment and creativity. Although exploring details of the participants’ dance content

for lessons was beyond the scope of this study, an integrated teaching approach favoured by some participants raises questions about the development of students' dance literacy (Ministry of Education, 2000, 2007) and the degree to which these participants may be basing their self-efficacy beliefs on students' interest in dance versus achievement.

Although participants could be wary of their own skills for demonstrating dance, they rose above the feelings of nervousness that could be aroused by the expectation of teaching it. Dedication to their teaching responsibilities and a sense of humour helped them to commit to being role models for dance for their students. Although teachers' self-efficacy beliefs do not necessarily equate to teacher effectiveness, there is a relationship to students' own motivation and self-efficacy beliefs (Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989; Ross, 1992). It is therefore important to ensure that teachers' acquire high self-efficacy beliefs for teaching dance if students are to have opportunities to experience the satisfaction and personal fulfilment that can come from dance learning.

## **Implications for teacher education**

The interview participants' mastery experiences in dance helped to develop and inform their sense of self-efficacy for teaching dance. It would seem to be vital, therefore, that ITE students are required to see and teach dance during practicum experiences so that their own sense of self-efficacy develops. As ITE programmes have come under pressure to reduce hours for curriculum courses (Cheesman, 2009; Ell, 2011; McGee, Cowie, & Cooper, 2010), emergent teachers are ever more reliant on seeing curriculum activities modelled in the classroom and on relevant and constructive feedback from mentor teachers. Ensuring that teachers are competent models and advocates for dance in the classroom assumes particular importance more than ever before.

The participating teachers' positive attitudes, personal enjoyment of dance, and belief in the dance benefits for their students helped to generate the motivation for teaching it, providing support for making these attributes important objectives in ITE and professional development dance experiences. Music was a major element in the participants'

enjoyment of dance. Assisting teachers to better understand how they can use their own or their students' musical interests in a variety of ways to create or support dance ideas could be beneficial in developing teachers' confidence and self-efficacy beliefs.

A particular finding that both ITE and professional development programmes could look at resolving was that some of the interview participants did not use the word *dance* to refer to its activities. Through assuming that dance would have negative connotations for some students, these participants may be perpetuating an image that dance is not a legitimate form of physical expression and learning for all students, which is an idea represented in research literature relating to dance and gender (see, for example, Gard, 2001). Evidence is needed that this view is supported by students themselves. Critically exploring gender stereotyping and expression in dance in ITE and classroom programmes could serve to make sure that students' dance experiences, achievement, and appreciation are not unduly limited.

Teachers in this study were teaching dance in integrated or interdisciplinary units more often than as a separate subject in its own right. Differences have been noted in the literature about how interdisciplinarity and integration are defined and can be translated in practice by teachers (de Vries & Poston-Anderson, 2001; Thornley & Graham, 2001). ITE and teacher professional development programmes could be directed to ways and means by which dance can be aligned or integrated with other curriculum learning areas and arts disciplines, so that dance-specific outcomes can be achieved in meaningful ways.

In summary, this research revealed some heartening patterns in feelings of self-efficacy for teaching dance amongst these participants. It was gratifying to see both the breadth of positive feelings of self-efficacy, the depth of confidence felt by these participants, and their tangible commitments to dance teaching in their schools. These participants offer positive and confident role models and collaborative dispositions that might support their colleagues and the passage of dance education into the future.

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## **The authors**

**Suzanne Renner** is the primary investigator in this research. She is a senior lecturer at the University of Otago College of Education. She teaches dance education and has a background as a professional performer and choreographer. She has made contributions to the development of dance resources and was a national professional development facilitator, for primary and secondary teachers. In 2015, she completed a Doctor of Education degree with a focus on generalist teachers' self-efficacy beliefs for teaching dance.

**Email:** [suzanne.renner@otago.ac.nz](mailto:suzanne.renner@otago.ac.nz)

**David Bell** is an Associate Professor at the University of Otago College of Education. Building on his background in secondary school teaching, curriculum and assessment development and facilitation, he teaches in ITE primary and secondary curriculum visual arts, and secondary classical studies, art history and postgraduate programmes. His research into aesthetic learning in museum settings embraces pedagogies founded in the visual, dance, dramatic and literary arts.