

Dancing ourselves whole (again): The lived experiences of
maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult
recreational ballet classes.

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Abstract

This study investigates the lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes. It sheds light on how dancing for leisure contributes to the health and wellbeing of women as they mature. It also reveals the social and situational factors which help create meaningful and enriching pedagogical experiences for adults in recreational dance settings.

Dance is an embodied phenomenon. As such, a methodology blending perceptual (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, 1964/1968) and existential phenomenology (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, 1970/1972) with Goffman's dramaturgical framework (Goffman, 1959) was used to illuminate the bodily and social experiences of dancing ballet while maturing. Hearing the voices of the women and recounting their stories in their own words was a priority in this study.

Six women aged between 30 and 80 years old were recruited from dance schools in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. In-depth, qualitative, audio-recorded phenomenological interviews were conducted to elicit the women's reflections on their relationships with ballet and the professional dance world. Notes were made by the researcher of the women's bodily and emotional responses as they reflected on their experiences.

Seven themes emerged from the data analysis. These revealed that, for the women who danced in childhood, their encounters with ballet left lasting positive and negative imprints on their identities. In their search for ballet learning opportunities, each of the women encountered ageism and negative stereotypes of femininity which impacted their health and wellbeing. When they finally found schools to call home, the women

flourished and thrived through the care and compassion of their teachers and the dance community.

The themes in the dancers' stories were interpreted using the writings of the theorists and the literature. The phenomenological interpretation process revealed three phenomena threaded throughout the women's reflections. The first was an overwhelming sense of pleasure and joy. This motivated participation and was the gateway to transcendence and freedom. The second was the intentional co-creation, by the women and their teachers, of compassionate communities which affirmed and normalised the diversity of maturing bodies. Within these communities the negative stereotypes of ageing and femininity were overturned. The maturing dancers were recast as capable ballet bodies and sources of creativity, beauty and grace. The third phenomenon was the negative stereotypes of ageing and femininity which were hidden in the background of each dancer's reflections. The women were aware of their stigmatised status and gleefully used dancing to resist and protest their marginalisation by western society and professional ballet. Through the chiasmatic intertwining of the physical practices and social worlds of ballet, the six maturing women in this study experienced improved physical, emotional and social health, and wellbeing. Through ballet each woman danced herself whole again.

The findings of this research revealed that the construction and embodiment of dancing identities are far more complex and meaningful than has been previously reported in the literature. This study highlights the importance of creating communities of practice where ageing is normalised and diversity is embraced. The learnings from this study will be of interest to adult recreational ballet dancers, professional dance organisations and sport and recreation professionals working with maturing populations.

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Attestation of authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed: Stephanie Dale Clout

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Ethics approval

“The lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes”

- Ethics application number: 20/388 (approved by AUTEK December 1, 2020)
- Minor amendments to 20/388 (approved by AUTEK July 2, 2024)

Chapter 1 Introduction

Dance gives people a purpose. If you fall in love with it, it will sustain you right through your life. It gives you a positive outlook ... people need a *modus vivendi*, a set of tools to deal with illness, life and disappointment. ... [Dance is] an inbuilt mechanism for longevity. (Gillian Lynne, as cited in Dodge, 2013, p. 24)

1.1 Rationale and significance

Physical activity is an essential part of health and wellbeing. The most recent New Zealand Health Survey observed that “46.5% of adults met [the] physical activity guidelines ... a decline from 51.3% in 2021/22” (Ministry of Health, 2023, Physical Activity section, para. 1). Rates of adult participation in physical activity begin to decline after 45 years of age (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). Dance is an activity that confers physical, cognitive, and psychosocial benefits on participants (Byun, 2018; Clarke et al., 2018; Clifford et al., 2023; Dodge, 2013; Fong Yan et al., 2018; Keogh et al., 2009; Knestaut et al., 2010; Letton, 2021; Letton et al., 2024; Meng et al., 2020; Nadasen, 2008; Quiroga Murcia et al., 2010). Promoting recreational dance, particularly ballet, as an alternative to traditional sport and fitness may provide an avenue to increasing physical activity and wellbeing for maturing New Zealand women.

In 2015 Dance Aotearoa New Zealand (DANZ) conducted a small survey on adult ballet participation (Kopytko, 2015). This is the first research published in New Zealand focusing on this topic. Shen researched the lived experiences of five adult Chinese migrants who participate in recreational Chinese ethnic and folk dance, tango, hip-hop, and contemporary dance classes in Auckland, New Zealand (Shen, 2020; Shen & Rowe, 2023). Hills and Snook (2023) interviewed seven teachers of maturing dancers in a variety of genres based in New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom. Newall de Jesus (2018) interviewed practitioners who teach ballet and creative and contemporary

dance to seniors. These publications and a small number of media articles on adult ballet represent the extent of what is currently known about the lives of maturing recreational ballet dancers in New Zealand. Women aged 35 and over are known to participate in recreational ballet classes throughout New Zealand, yet their experiences of participation and its impact on their lives are largely undocumented.

1.2 Contribution and significance of this study

This study contributes to the scholarly knowledge about ballet as adult recreation and leisure in New Zealand. This study critically reveals in detail maturing women's experiences of recreational ballet and the meaning of dancing in their lives. The research findings highlight the significant role that joy, emotional expression, and interpersonal relationships play in helping women navigate the physical and social changes that accompany ageing. First-hand accounts of women's experiences of maturing are often overlooked in the scholarly research and grey literature. This study aims to contribute to this body of knowledge by amplifying the concerns and needs of a segment of our community that has been rendered invisible and marginalised by western society's emphasis on youth.

This study uses phenomenology and Goffmanian dramaturgy to investigate recreational participants' experiences of dancing ballet while maturing. Phenomenological philosophy and methodology aim to illuminate the essential characteristics and meanings of everyday, taken-for-granted phenomena. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2002, 1964/1968) perceptual phenomenology is used to explore the strategies maturing women employ to master ballet technique and embody the dancer identity. Simone de Beauvoir's (1949/1993, 1970/1972) existential phenomenology highlights the social and cultural norms underpinning the concepts of *woman* and *old age* in

western society. This approach is used to reveal the ways in which recreational dance experiences and women's identities are shaped by these stereotypes. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model of the presentation of the self (Goffman, 1959) provides a framework for examining the rules that govern social interactions and performances of identity within recreational organisations and the wider world of professional dance. This lens is used to discover how participants as individuals and members of groups enact the recreational ballet dancer role.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights for adults wishing to dance, for researchers wanting to understand the experience of dancing while maturing, and for dance organisations wanting to design and market ballet programmes to this population.

1.3 Scope and limitations

Dance studios in the private and community sectors in New Zealand are the contextual locations examined. The participants at the time of data collection were women aged 35 years or over who: 1) had participated continuously in ballet classes for one year or more; 2) studied ballet in a dance or ballet school; 3) had no prior participation in pre-professional or professional ballet training as an adolescent or young adult; and 4) are conversational English speakers.

Women were selected for this research as the literature suggests that they are the predominant participants in adult recreational ballet classes. For this reason, men were not interviewed. Adults aged 35 years and over were recruited as physical activity in midlife has been identified as a key determinant of health outcomes in later adulthood (Lachman et al., 2014). A minimum of one years continuous dance practice was considered enough time for participants to accumulate experiences of dancing and

ballet culture on which they could reflect. Dance teachers and retired professionals dancing in recreational contexts were not included, as the experiences of these dancers are well documented in the literature. Participant eligibility criteria and recruitment methods were approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) in December 2020 (Ethics application number 20/388, see Appendix A).

1.4 Research questions and sub-questions

What are the lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes?

- How does recreational ballet participation contribute to health, wellbeing, and positive ageing for New Zealand women?
- What social and situational factors contribute to the creation of positive and meaningful pedagogical experiences for maturing women who participate in recreational dance?

1.5 Researcher background and positionality

1.5.1 An unlikely ballet dancer

I am a maturing woman of Māori and Pākehā descent. Brown skinned, earthbound, and built like a brick outhouse, I am an unlikely ballet dancer. Many of my ballet classmates have rich family histories of dance participation. They have photographs and stories which are cherished and shared. The members of my extended whānau do not dance. My grandparents never spoke of participating in dancing or other cultural activities. As a child, my attempts to elicit information from my parents about their experiences of dance were almost always met with suspicion, cold silence and sometimes anger. As an

adult I have come to realise that the social worlds I exist in, and the privileges these worlds offer, are very different to those of my parents and whānau.

My Pākehā grandmother was an unmarried teenager when my father was born. He was sent away as a baby to live with her distant relatives in Auckland. There he stayed hidden from the gaze of his mother's suitors and concealed from contact with his Māori father's whānau. In my dad's Pākehā family, dancing and public expressions of joy were not permitted. Cultural activities and the performing arts were for the educated middle and upper classes. Māori were considered a primitive people, untrustworthy, incapable of learning, and suitable only for labouring or the trades. Dad learned as a child that brown male bodies were shameful and had no place in Pākehā society. My mother's whānau moved around the remote sawmilling settlements of the King Country and Whanganui. Mum knew that proficiency in social etiquette and the arts were needed to marry well and escape poverty. At school she wanted to learn painting, dancing and drama but was denied the opportunity. Educating backcountry bush Māori was considered a waste of time. Mum learned as a child that brown female bodies were destined only for childrearing or the factories, and were unwelcome in Pākehā society. The only accounts of dancing in my parents' lives are the ballroom lessons they took in preparation for their wedding. There is no whānau legacy of dance and no photographs or stories. Dancing was something other people engaged in.

How did a daughter from a Māori whānau end up in ballet? My parents enrolled me in dance classes at three years old. They hoped this would equip me with the social-cultural capital required to pass as Pākehā and open doors to opportunities that were closed to them as working-class Māori. Learning ballet and assimilating into its middle-class cultural world was not an easy task. I inherited my father's two left feet, lack of spatial

awareness, and inability to identify left from right. Developing the physical competencies required to master ballet technique was and still is difficult. Thankfully I also acquired my mother's dogged perseverance and refusal to follow gendered or ethnic social norms. I danced until starting high school when my parents could no longer afford the cost of classes. I completed my schooling, went to university, and entered the workforce, all the while missing the intangible pleasures that come from being one with music and movement. In each place I lived I hunted for ballet classes. Finding none were offered, I gave up looking. It was ballet that found me again over 30 years later. After sustaining a shoulder injury at CrossFit, I saw an advertisement for adult ballet classes. Convinced that I needed to improve my fitness and coordination for weightlifting, I enrolled in the beginner's initiation course. In doing so I rediscovered my love of dance and became immersed in the intoxicating, hidden, and sometimes controversial world of adult ballet.

I am very much at home in the world of adult dance and have never returned to my old CrossFit box. From my perspective, the ballet studio is a world of social interaction and support, and a community of practice. The dancers and teachers who inhabit these spaces create the school and classroom culture. This world of wood and mirrors is intentionally co-constructed each time we meet. Every class I am part of follows the standard ballet lesson format and uses a recognised syllabus, yet the energy and feel are always different. Some classes are relaxed and filled with laughter. Others are earnest, quiet, and focused. All reflect the personalities, learning needs and desires of the women (and, occasionally, men) who inhabit them. Within these spaces, individuals from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds intertwine and connect through a shared love of dance.

Ballet for me is primarily a sensorial rather than cognitive experience. In my working life I am a teaching librarian at a university in New Zealand. I spend most of my day sitting in front of a computer or talking with staff and students. My mind is active, but my body feels deeply disconnected and asleep. Dancing allows me to become a living body again. This experience of being a living, dancing body is perceptual and sensory. The integration of all senses is required during dancing. All parts of my mind and body must be awake and switched on. I use my eyes to check the external placement and look of my body in the mirror. I have learned not to rely on these visual cues, as they are often misleading. Instead, I use a combination of gut intuition, proprioception, and the somatic experience of movement to double-check my alignment and posture. Ballet has a particular feeling within my body. The tensions and sensations emanating from the pull of muscle on tendons and bones tell me about the quality of my movements. I hear the music and feel its rhythms through the floor and throughout my body. My breathing and heartbeat often adjust to the count or beat of the music.

Different music elicits different physical and emotional responses, all of which are externally visible in my movements and expressions. I have learned to recognise where I and others are in the studio using senses other than sight. The movement of air across my skin, the touch of clothing against my body, the sound of other bodies moving, and changes in the music as it travels across the studio all tell me of my proximity to my classmates and the direction we are moving in. By privileging perception over thinking in movement, I make space for pleasure, joy, and freedom.

Freedom is a difficult word to define yet it is central to my experience of dance. For me, the concept of freedom is best summarised by de Beauvoir:

to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom. (de Beauvoir, 1948/2015, p. 97)

de Beauvoir (1948/2015, p. 93) positions freedom as a “universally human” right that is available to an individual within the context of the norms of their whānau, community, and wider society. The extent to which I am free to make my own choices is determined by those around me. My freedom to dance is contingent on society allowing me to do so. The individual is inseparable from and accountable to the community in which they dwell. For de Beauvoir, the pursuit of freedom in later life can be an enriching and rewarding experience. Maturing adults “who are willing to look it [death] in the face they also discover that every movement toward death is life” (de Beauvoir, 1948/2015, p. 137). I believe that the possibilities for freedom and transcendence reside in us until our very last breath.

Like the participants in this study, recreational dance is an integral part of my existence. It is at the heart of my feelings of health and wellbeing. My beliefs are closely aligned to the *Te Whare Tapa Wha*, a New Zealand framework which acknowledges that physical and mental wellbeing are multifaceted and complex concepts (Durie, 1994). This is a holistic model which highlights the physical, mental, spiritual, and social aspects of health and wellbeing. *Te Whare Tapa Wha* firmly situates the individual within their whānau and community. This is a social model of health which can be applied to individuals irrespective of their age, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

I view dance as a form of embodied knowledge and communication. Dance is a facet of my being-in-the-world. It is part of who and what I am. Ballet and I are intertwined in an

inseparable and reciprocal relationship. Through ballet I have come to know myself, understand others and make sense of the world we share.

Through dance I have found my freedom. I am, however, very aware that dance as a pathway to freedom is still unavailable to many maturing adults in New Zealand.

1.5.2 A participant researcher

As a maturing female recreational ballet dancer, I am a “physical-cultural insider” in this project (McNarry et al., 2019, p. 2). Since returning to dance in 2016 I have become an active participant in the local scene and the international adult ballet movement on social media. I attend classes at three Auckland schools. The first school offers over 30 syllabus and open classes for new beginners to advanced adults. Here, dancers are given opportunities to learn pointe work and repertoire, participate in performances, and sit annual examinations set by an international ballet organisation.

The other schools I attend cater for adults of all ages. These offer beginner and higher-level open classes and pointe work. Here, students are given opportunities to participate in competitions and performances. The maturing dancers are visible and active in school life. Young adults who have previously attended the schools as children often return to dancing in the adult classes. However, the provision of ballet classes as described above is the exception rather than the norm in New Zealand.

This project began with a question that would not go away and has repeatedly informed my research: Why do the eyes of maturing recreational ballet dancers always seem to twinkle? I noticed this phenomenon in the studios I danced in, and while watching adult dancers on social media and in the *Big Ballet* reality television series (Channel Four Television Corporation, 2014). In 2018 I read the *Ballet Moves for Adult Creative Health*

research report (Ali-Haapala et al., 2018) and *the Active Older People 2016-2020 Discussion Document* (Sport New Zealand, 2016). I was filled with curiosity and more questions. I asked fellow dancers why they came to ballet classes. All replied that the music, the movement and the social aspects gave them joy and pleasure. Their replies revealed that this sense of joy from dance seemed to spread into other parts of their lives and had a positive impact on their overall health and wellbeing. Their answers did not satisfy my curiosity and I began to wonder: If recreational dance is beneficial for health and wellbeing, and is meaningful for maturing women then why are there so few adult ballet classes and why are maturing adults largely absent in the dance literature?

This project was sparked by frustration at this lack of provision and a strong belief in the rights of all adults to have equal access to the same recreation as younger people. Underpinning this project is a desire to make the voices of the unheard heard, in this case maturing women in 21st century New Zealand.

1.6 Background to this project

1.6.1 Dance is a physical, social and cultural phenomenon

There is no one single definition of dance. Hanna (1987, p. 48) considered the various definitions proposed by scholars and offered this:

dance is defined as human behavior composed ... of purposeful, intentionally rhythmical, and culturally patterned sequences of non-verbal body movement which are not ordinary motor activities, the motion having inherent and aesthetic value.

Hanna's definition speaks to the central role of dance in the social and cultural life of human societies.

1.6.2 Ballet is a western ethnic dance and performing art

Ballet is a Western European ethnic dance genre originating in the 14th century from the social dances performed in the royal courts of Renaissance Italy (Homans, 2010; Keali'inohomoku, 2001; Lee, 1999). From Italy, ballet spread throughout Europe. In the 17th century French court, ballet developed into a highly codified system of technique and terminology (Hanna, 2003; Morris, 2003). Under Louis XIV, proficiency in ballet became a required skill for French aristocrats (Homans, 2010). Here, ballet moved from being a social dance to an elite performing art and a tool for exerting soft political influence. Variations in styles of ballet developed in the countries where the monarchy and aristocratic classes held power. Classical ballet has become the most technically demanding of the western theatrical dance genres. To perform professionally, dancers undergo intensive training in ballet technique from childhood until late adolescence.

The social order and dominant worldviews of a society are reflected in their dances (Hanna, 2010; Keali'inohomoku, 2001). Classical ballet reflects the ideological constructions of western gender and power relations (Novack, 1993). The aesthetics of the ballet body, the representations of masculinity and femininity, the stage sets, themes and the symbolism are all manifestations of western cultural norms (Aalten, 1997).

1.6.3 Little is known about adult recreational ballet in New Zealand

Dancing has always been a popular recreational activity in New Zealand (Jahn-Werner, 2008). Letters, diaries, photographs, and stories are testimony that social dance genres play an integral role in the lives of adult New Zealanders (White, 2005, 2007). In contrast to social dance, much less is known about ballet as a recreational activity for adults.

Prior to 2010, few ballet education opportunities were available for adults in New Zealand. Community organisations such as City Dance (formally known as Danceworks) (City Dance, 2009) and TAPAC (The Auckland Performing Arts Centre, n.d.) have taught adult recreational ballet since the 1980s and 2000s. Research on participation in adult ballet in New Zealand is limited to a survey conducted by DANZ and summarised by Kopytko (2015). Five dance studios and 35 adult participants responded. Responses from dance studios reflected the sector's reluctance to engage with adult learners, and a lack of awareness of adult needs and appropriate pedagogies. The responses from the adult participants revealed frustration with the attitudes of the sector, and the availability and quality of adult ballet classes. Participants also reported that ballet participation was significantly beneficial to their health and wellbeing. The New Zealand findings summarised by Kopytko (2015) reflect those reported in international research and in the grey literature.

The lived experiences of maturing recreational ballet dancers are also reflected in the accounts of their teachers in the research and grey literature. Lang (2018), Newall de Jesus (2018), Armah (2022) and Hills and Snook (2023) report the voices of ballet teachers reflecting on their adult learners and the pedagogies used to create safe and inclusive environments for learning to dance.

Aside from this survey and the articles containing teacher's voices, the coverage of adult ballet in New Zealand is limited to: a handful of articles in the popular media (James, 2017; Lang, 2018; Malcouronne, 2005; Nichol, 2016; Prebble, 2019; Spink, 2015; Te, 2017; Thorne-George, 2010; Waiwiri-Smith, 2022; Weil, 2019; White, 2018); items on Television New Zealand (Senior Swans, 2017) and Radio New Zealand ("Silver Swans,"

2019); and brief mentions in statistical publications and datasets (Sport New Zealand, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c; Statistics New Zealand, 2018, 2022b; Verian, 2023a, 2023b).

Ballet is one of many dance forms practiced in New Zealand. Hip hop, contemporary dance, Kapa Haka and Pacific Island cultural genres frequently appear in the popular media. In contrast, adult ballet and maturing adult ballet learners are largely invisible within New Zealand's recreational and cultural landscape. Yet they are part of a thriving and growing local and international adult dance social media community. Word of mouth in the online community indicates that increasing numbers of maturing women are joining recreational ballet classes throughout New Zealand. Their experiences of participation, and its meaning and impact on their health and wellbeing, are largely undocumented in the empirical literature.

1.6.4 The hidden history of ballet in New Zealand

The first European migrants to New Zealand predominantly came from the United Kingdom (Belich, 2001). Social dancing, theatre, singing, and opera are the most frequently documented entertainments in 19th century New Zealand (Andrews, 1979; Downes, 1975; Jahn-Werner, 2008). The *Papers Past* database reveals that theatrical, social, and Māori dance were of interest to colonial New Zealanders (National Library of New Zealand, n.d.). Reviews of ballet performances, gossip about ballerinas and ballet girls, and reports on the deaths of dancers in theatre fires appear in New Zealand newspapers as early as 1841. The popularity of ballet increased after 1913, following national tours by English and Russian dance companies. Ballerinas Adeline Genée and Anna Pavlova captured the public imagination with their virtuoso dancing. As a result, demand for dance classes, examinations, and qualified teachers rapidly increased (Jahn-Werner, 2008). This cultural resurgence led to the formation of the New Zealand branch

of the Royal Academy of Dancing in the 1930s (Royal Academy of Dance [RAD], 1980), The Royal New Zealand Ballet in 1953 (Shennan & Rowse, 2013), and the New Zealand National Ballet School in 1967 (Jahn-Werner, 2008). Ballet as a performing art became firmly entrenched in New Zealand's cultural landscape and ballet classes became a childhood rite of passage.

Adults have traditionally been excluded from ballet education (Hill et al., 2016). Despite this, New Zealand women are known to attend classes and are actively involved in the international adult ballet movement through social media. Statistics on dance participation in New Zealand are collected by Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage, Statistics New Zealand, Creative New Zealand and Sport New Zealand. The data reveals that adults across the lifespan take part in a variety of dance genres. The New Zealand experience is similar to the most recent statistics collected from Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023), England (Luty, 2020), and Scotland (Lange, 2019). Data on adult participation in ballet is grouped under the dance category. However, these statistics reveal little about participation or the meaning of recreational ballet and dance within the lives of adults.

1.6.5 Thesis structure

This study explores the lived experiences of maturing women who participate in recreational ballet classes in New Zealand. The writings of Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002, 1964/1968), Goffman (1959), and de Beauvoir (1949/1993, 1970/1972) are used to guide the interpretation of participants' experiences of the adult ballet phenomenon. Literature on attitudes to ageing in western society and the role of leisure in adulthood are used to help illuminate the place and meanings of dance in the lives of maturing women. The findings of this study focus on: ballet as community and social support;

messages about maturing feminine bodies in ballet; negotiating new identities through dance; artistic expression and creativity as sources of wellbeing; and adult ballet as advocacy and activism.

This thesis therefore consists of the following chapters. Chapter Two, “Literature review – Situating dance research and praxis”, summarises what is known about adult ballet and the life worlds of maturing recreational dancers. This chapter seeks to build a picture of the identity of adult ballet dancers through their own accounts and reports from the dance profession. The current state of knowledge about adult ballet participation in New Zealand is discussed and the knowledge gap is identified.

Chapter Three, “Methodology”, outlines the philosophical framework underpinning this study. Phenomenology is the study of our interactions with and perceptions of the phenomena we encounter in our everyday lives. Phenomenological research asks questions about the ‘essence’ or essential nature of a lived phenomenon. Relevant aspects of Merleau-Pontian perceptual and Beauvoirian existential phenomenology are described. This is supported by an outline of Goffman’s dramaturgical model of self-presentation within the social world.

Chapter Four, “Research design and methods”, outlines the data collection and analysis methods used in this study. This iterative process was guided by van Manen (1997, 2014) and Vagle (2014). Data was collected using semi-structured audio-taped interviews. Themes were identified by: repeated reading of the parts and whole of each transcript; reflecting on participants’ recollections; writing interpretations; and reflective journaling. Dwelling in the data was accompanied by immersion in the philosophical writings of Merleau-Ponty, Goffman and de Beauvoir. Assessing trustworthiness and phenomenological rigour in the interpretive process are discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Five, “Findings”, presents the findings from the participant interviews. This chapter discusses the themes or essences at the heart of the participants’ experiences and their relationships with the adult ballet phenomenon.

Chapter Six, “Discussion”, explores the meanings of recreational ballet in the lives of maturing female recreational dancers in New Zealand with the help of the literature and the writings of the three theorists, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002, 1964/1968), Goffman (1959) and de Beauvoir (1949/1993, 1970/1972). Three key phenomena drawn from the reflections highlighted in Chapter Five are explored and interpreted with the help of the literature. The meanings and significance of recreational ballet are discussed within the context of the research question and sub-questions which guided this study. These meanings are glimpsed through three themes:

- Pleasure and joy are at the heart of recreational ballet practice.
- The dancers and their teachers work together to co-construct the social worlds of adult dance.
- Maturing dancers use adult recreational ballet as a tool of resistance and activism against the social stereotypes which render them and professional dancers as the invisible other.

Participant voices are used to illuminate how these themes contribute to health, wellbeing, and quality of life in midlife and beyond. The findings of this study provide valuable insights for adults wishing to dance, for researchers wanting to understand the experience of dancing while maturing, and for dance organisations wanting to design and market ballet programmes to this population.

Chapter Seven, “Conclusions, recommendations and reflections”, presents the research conclusions and recommendations for future study. Maturing adult dancers and their teachers are quietly flipping the traditional ballet classroom from a place of authoritarianism to one that privileges joy, emotional expression, and diversity. These social activists in tutus are challenging invisibility, ageism, and decline narratives through recreational ballet. Recommendations for action and suggested themes for future research in New Zealand are given. This thesis concludes with personal reflections. First, I offer two personal reflections on how the doctoral research process has changed my beliefs about myself as a dancer and my teaching practices. One further reflection is offered concerning aspects of this topic I would like to explore in the future. Illuminating the lived experiences of adult ballet teachers as dancers and maturing bodies is at the heart of my future research objectives. Teachers are the key to the transformation of mindsets and practices in the dance sector.

Chapter 2 Literature review – Situating dance research and praxis

2.1 Introduction

The ballet research literature is dominated by studies on the injury epidemiology, physiology, and psychology of elite adolescent and professional adults. The use of dance activities and movement as therapeutic treatments for neurological disorders in maturing adults is well reported and is the subject of much ongoing research. Very little research, however, has focused on the lived experiences of non-professional adults participating in traditional ballet classes in recreational and community contexts.

Adult learners are part of wider debates on the visibility of maturing bodies in professional dance. Like maturing professional dancers, adult ballet learners are largely silent in the literature. This chapter situates adult bodies within the ideologies of the youthful dancing body that underpin the world of professional dance. This chapter makes visible the authentic learner narratives hidden within the scholarly literature, professional ballet publications, and popular media sources. Perspectives from adult learners, their teachers, and the wider dance sector are used to paint a picture of what is known about the lived experiences and positioning of maturing recreational dancers in the world of classical ballet. The current state of knowledge about adult ballet participation in New Zealand is discussed and the knowledge gap is identified.

2.1.1 The ballet body is a youthful body

Ballet is a social practice that shapes the body and identity of the dancer (Wainwright & Turner, 2003, 2004). As a highly visual performing art, ballet focuses on how movement looks to the audience and in the studio mirrors (Harrington, 2020). The primacy of “youthful and mobile bodies” is at the heart of the western ballet aesthetic (Coupland,

2013, p. 4). This aesthetic requires female dancers to have “extremely slim bodies with long legs, short torso, a long neck and a small head” (Aalten, 1997, p. 50). Feminine “beauty and grace for women are equated with excessive thinness” (Aalten, 1997, p. 50) and bodies “without feminine curves” (Aalten, 1997, p. 53).

The construction of the ballerina and the ballet body make “several bodies and body shapes impossible” (Ritenburg, 2010, p. 75). These include “the old body ... the disabled body ... the racialized body ... the voluptuous body with full breasts, curving hips and soft arms and thighs” (Ritenburg, 2010, p. 75). The “physiological demands of ballet training” position professional dancers “as athletes” (Soric et al., 2008, p. 343). The image of the ballet dancer “is the hard, athletic body with defined and visual muscle, muscular legs, deltoids or biceps” (Ritenburg, 2010, p. 75). The construction of the perpetually youthful athletic dancing body is at odds with the reality of the maturing professional and recreational dancer.

2.1.2 Maturing bodies in western theatrical dance

Western society constructs maturing bodies as undesirable (Coupland, 2013). This ideology is naturalised and institutionalised through messages conveyed by the mass media and popular culture (Coupland, 2013; Martin, 2017). Young people are positioned as beautiful, watchable, and worthy of society’s gaze. In contrast, maturing bodies are framed as unattractive, unwatchable, and invisible (Coupland, 2013; Martin, 2017).

Narratives of physical decline and fear of ageing are embodied during dance training and become core to the dancer’s personal and professional identity (Hansen & Kenny, 2019; Martin, 2017; Rustad & Engelsrud, 2022; Southcott & Joseph, 2020). Wainwright and Turner (2004, p. 108) noted that “the physical decline of the dancer’s body ... is a threat

to both a dancer's career and their very identity." There is a sense of inevitability around maturing as "the aesthetic of classical ballet, its requirements for perfect bodies coupled with outstanding ballet technique, means there are no classical dancing roles for dancers once they reach the age of around 40 years" (Wainwright & Turner, 2004, p. 114).

In classical ballet, dancers traditionally retire from public performances by their mid- to late-30s (Edward & Newall, 2011; Hansen & Kenny, 2019; Kassing, 1981; York-Pryce, 2020). Injuries, the demands of modern choreography, ageist practices within the profession, and the attitudes of the media, public, and fellow dancers make continuing to dance difficult (Bolwell, 2017; Early, 2013; Edward & Newall, 2011; Hansen & Kenny, 2019; Rainer, 2014; Schwaiger, 2006a; Wainwright & Turner, 2004). Dancing beyond the profession's "expectations of an acceptable age to perform" (York-Pryce, 2020, p. iii) is a "social faux pas" (Edward & Newall, 2011, p. 2) and leads to stigmatisation (Martin, 2017; Rustad & Engelsrud, 2022).

2.1.3 What becomes of the maturing professional dancer?

Early retirement and inherent ageism within the profession lead to a "wanton squandering of talent almost before it becomes artistry" (Early, 2013, p. 71). Many ballet dancers move to careers on the periphery (York-Pryce, 2023). Leaving a performing career by choice, injury, or forced retirement is experienced by dancers as a deep sense of grief over the "loss of identity, social network, place and belonging, structure (comfort and familiarity), greatness and significance, expressive outlet and physicality" (Dean, 2023, p. 95). Those who choose to continue performing encounter barriers such as a lack of roles and funding opportunities (Early, 2013; Schwaiger, 2006a; York-Pryce, 2023).

Moving to non-performing roles does not protect retired dancers from ageism or being further marginalised. Professional dancers often move into teaching roles. Teachers who produce talented and high-performing students are considered “exemplary” and are valued in the classical ballet world (Chua, 2017, p. 4). Teaching, particularly in recreational contexts, is not always considered a desirable or high-status occupation. Stinson et al. (1990) provided an example of how teaching dance as a career is viewed by learners. For the highly trained ballet students in Stinson et al. (1990, p. 19), teaching was “not seen as an attractive alternative” to a performing career. One participant noted that “I can’t settle for teaching. It’s like stepping down.” The low status of teaching as a career option in comparison to performing on the stage may reflect that teachers, like other dance artists, work in a sector which is poorly funded; employment is “intermittent” and “highly casualised”; contracts are “low paid”; and “dancers experience extended periods of unemployment” (Hopper et al., 2020, p. 471). In New Zealand, “salaries have not kept up with pay in other industries ... or [with] dancers in other countries” (Wilcox, 2019, p. 5). In Australia, dance professionals “are likely to be young, city-based, and female” (Bennett, 2009, p. 27) and “are the lowest paid profession within the performing arts” (Dursun, 2022, para. 4).

Discussions around the maturing body in professional dance have extended to focus on the issues faced by teachers. Duffy (2022, p. 33) investigated teachers’ experiences of maturing within dance teaching contexts, finding that “the expectations of the body to perform in teaching are strikingly similar to that of performers.” This is of particular concern for teachers in postsecondary and professional contexts where they are expected to demonstrate advanced technical movements and be able to keep up with their students. Like maturing performers, these teachers experience increased numbers

of injuries, changes in mobility, and concerns about job security. Duffy (2022) argued that teacher training and professional development programmes need to take maturing bodies into consideration. If retired dancers are to continue to contribute to the art, then strategies and models of teaching need to reflect the different stages of a dance teacher's career.

2.1.4 Rethinking ageing in dance

Twyla Tharp, a professional dancer and choreographer, wrote about the experience of growing older and learning to accept the changes this brings. Tharp (2019, p. 4) stressed that "chasing youth is a losing proposition." Dancers and maturing adults need to change their view of ageing and embrace the "vitality it brings ... and the opportunity to be truly present" in the body and mind (Tharp, 2019, p. 4). Tharp (2019, p. 4) noted that "We don't lose youth. Youth stays put. We move on. We need to face that aging will happen to us along with everybody else and just get on with it."

A small body of literature describes the experiences of dancers who challenge ageist attitudes by continuing to perform. Dancing while maturing provides practitioners with an opportunity to reconnect with their authentic selves, to use their cultural capital to grow as artists, and to live full lives (Edward & Newall, 2011; H. Kim et al., 2022; Wainwright & Turner, 2004; York-Pryce, 2023). The importance of being part of a community of maturing dancers is at the heart of many accounts. Being in a group provided a safe place for dancers to explore the impacts of ageism, to think about the limitations and possibilities of their maturing bodies, and to make their bodies visible on the stage (Early, 2013; Markula et al., 2022; Markula, Jeffrey, Nikolai, & Deol, 2023; Millar, 2018; Nikolai & Markula, 2021; Southcott & Joseph, 2020). In coming together as

a community, maturing dancers were able to resist ageist narratives and find new freedoms.

2.1.5 Attitudes of the professional dance sector

Underpinning adult ballet learner narratives is the difficult relationship between the dance profession and ageing. When adult learners choose to engage with western theatrical dance, they enter a world which privileges the youthful body, athleticism, and beauty (Allen-Collinson, 2012; Bolwell, 2017; Early, 2013; Schwaiger, 2006a, 2006b). Adult learners often encounter these beliefs when entering the ballet classroom.

2.1.6 The positioning of adult learners by the ballet profession

Adult learners rarely appear in professional or scholarly discussions on ballet. Two themes emerge from the literature on the positioning of adult learners by the profession: Adults are the audience rather than performers, and adults are central to the survival of ballet. These themes point to a tension between the strong desire to uphold the elitist traditions that exclude 'the other' and the need to open closed doors to ensure the survival of ballet.

Sayers (1997, p. 140) noted that parents send "their daughters to ballet to promote traditional female virtues of grace, charm and elegance, as well as good co-ordination and deportment." Except for the very talented, there are no expectations from the dance profession that "the amateur once-a-week child, and the physically unsuited" would continue ballet classes into adulthood (Sayers, 1997, p. 141). Instead, they are expected to become future ballet audiences. Dyson (2009) described how audiences of western theatrical dance have positioned adults as passive observers of dance rather than dancers or participants. Dyson (2009, p. 7) noted that "the dance profession has

embedded within it not only conventions of how to perform, but how to teach, create and also how to watch dance.” Within the context of the “traditional ‘Western presentation’ paradigm” (Dyson, 2009, p. 2), non-professional adults can only be part of the audience. The audience consists of passive participants in the performance and in the creation of meaning. Here, passive is defined as receiving, watching, or viewing a performance without physical engagement.

The ballet profession’s expectation that adults will be passive participants is evident throughout the learner narratives. This positioning has traditionally been reflected in the scarcity of teacher training in adult pedagogies and syllabi focusing on the needs of adult ballet learners. Moves to rectify these structural inequalities and barriers began with the introduction of the RAD Adult Dance Practice Certificate for teachers (Marris, 2012; RAD, 2018b) and online professional development modules for: Dance for Older Adults (RAD, 2023a); Dancing into Adulthood (RAD, 2023b); and Principles of Adult Ballet (RAD, 2023c). In 2013, the RAD introduced the Silver Swans programme targeting adults aged 50 to 80 years old (Malina, 2017). In 2018, the RAD Discovering Repertoire assessment programme was introduced for adults wanting to learn classical ballet variations (Naik, 2017; RAD, 2018a). In the same year, the Australian Institute of Classical Dance introduced an Adult Assessment Programme designed to meet the needs of beginner and returning dancers aged 16 years old and over (Australian Institute of Classical Dance, 2018). The introduction of the teacher training certificate, professional development modules, and adult syllabi signal a change in the positioning and acceptance of non-professional adult learners by the ballet profession.

The increasing acceptance of adults as participants in ballet classes and the rise of the adult ballet movement reflect an awareness that adults may be central to the survival

of ballet. This change in perception has been driven by a decline in child and adolescent enrolments and an expected change in the age demographics of populations in industrialised countries. In 2011, the RAD reported a “sharp drop” in examination registrations in the two years following the global recession (Shepard, 2011, para. 2). Turner (2018) noted that this decrease has continued due to the lingering effects of the downturn and changing attitudes of young people to hard work. Turner (2018, para. 1) states that “television talent shows are putting children off ballet as they are no longer willing to spend time perfecting the discipline.” McBirnie, former RAD Director of Examinations, added that, in times of economic stress, ballet classes, and examination fees are the first items to go from household budgets (Turner, 2018).

Since 2013, the RAD has been advising members of an expected decline in birth rates in industrialised countries and a significant increase in the number of adults aged 65 years and over (RAD, 2018b). It is anticipated that fewer children will enrol in ballet classes and there will be a decline in vocational training enrolments (RAD, 2018b; Watts, 2013, p. 6).

2.2 Finding adult recreational dancers in the literature

Discussions of recreational ballet in the research and grey literature usually focus on the experiences of children and adolescents. Academic journal databases, institutional research repositories, dance industry magazines, book chapters, reports, statistics, and popular media sources were searched to locate data on adult recreational dance and lived experiences of adult ballet.

2.2.1 Adult recreational dance in the literature

Eighty-five research studies focusing on recreational adult dancers were identified from academic journal databases and institutional research repositories. Fifteen studies discussed adult ballet participation. These studies are predominantly quantitative and focus on measuring the impacts of ballet on physical health, symptom management for neurological disorders, and cognitive outcomes. Eleven of the 85 research studies used a phenomenological methodology. One of these included adult recreational ballet dancers. The master's thesis of McManus (2012) included participants taking ballet classes and used a "phenomenological approach ... derived from the work of philosophers such as Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty" (p. 11). Two phenomenological studies focused on the experiences of New Zealand recreational dancers (Shen, 2020; Shen & Rowe, 2023). Neither the master's thesis (Shen, 2020) nor the article based on the original study (Shen & Rowe, 2023) included adult recreational ballet dancers. The "phenomenological qualitative" approach (Shen & Rowe, 2023, p. 3) was not aligned to a specific theorist and phenomenological methods were not described in enough detail to determine if Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002) underpinned this research.

2.3 Themes from the research literature

Adults participate in a wide variety of cultural, social, and theatrical dance genres. Three key subthemes emerged from the research literature:

- Health and wellbeing are at the heart of recreational participation.
- The need for adult-appropriate pedagogies in the recreational dance classroom.
- A scarcity of statistics and research on adult ballet participation in New Zealand.

2.3.1 Health and wellbeing are at the heart of recreational participation

Adults experienced a range of health and wellbeing benefits from participating in recreational dance. The most frequently cited benefits were positive impacts on:

- Physical and cognitive functioning.
- Affective wellbeing.
- Identity in adulthood.
- Social wellbeing.

Dance benefits physical and cognitive functioning

Adult recreational dancers reported better health and greater life satisfaction than those who did not dance (Cogle et al., 2020; Leadbetter & O'Connor, 2013). In maturing adults, dance participation can lower triglycerides, and improve cardiovascular fitness, muscle endurance, flexibility, balance, mobility, and body mass index (Byun, 2018; Clarke et al., 2018; Clifford et al., 2023; Fong Yan et al., 2018; Letton, 2021; Letton et al., 2020). Dance may have a protective effect on cognition and neuroplasticity (Hewston et al., 2021; Meng et al., 2020; Muiños & Ballesteros, 2021). However, Rehfeld et al. (2018) noted that increases in brain volume and neuroplasticity are dependent on participants learning increasingly challenging movement patterns and choreography. Researchers disagree on the extent to which dance improves executive function (Meng et al., 2020), or complex attention, learning, and memory (Hewston et al., 2021). It is also unclear if dance is more effective than other forms of physical activity for older adults (Meng et al., 2020).

Not all dance genres produce equal health benefits across all domains. de Paula Venancio et al. (2018) examined the physical and functional benefits of participation in Senior Dance, a form of social dancing, and found no significant changes. Franco et al.

(2020) found that Senior Dance was effective in improving balance and mobility but not cognitive function in community-dwelling older people. Watts (2014, p. 156) noted that the research studies supporting the health benefits of dance in later life seem to “be correlated with amateur dance activity throughout adulthood rather than the specific uptake of dance in later life.”

Dance has positive impacts on affective wellbeing

Recent research has focused on the role of dance in promoting positive affective states in maturing adults. Affective experiences, such as pleasure and joy, contribute to wellbeing by helping maturing adults manage natural, age-related physical changes and improve their perception of their body image (Chipperfield, 2018; Chipperfield & Bissell, 2023). Conrad (2021) proposed that affectivity is a social phenomenon. In the dance context, the classroom becomes an “affective niche” (Conrad, 2021, p. 185). Thoughtful planning by the dance teacher can create a space where dancers can find deeper engagement with movement, their own feelings, and other dancers. Alfredsson Olsson and Heikkinen (2019) found that social interactions during dancing can create negative or positive feelings such as joy and pride. Dancing in a group may also produce a feeling of belonging and sense of satisfaction that impacts all aspects of wellbeing (Shen & Rowe, 2023, Zygmunt et al., 2023).

These positive experiences can promote continued participation. Pleasure from engaging in leisure is a key component in quality of life (An et al., 2023) and an under-researched aspect of physical activity in adulthood (Phoenix & Orr, 2014, 2015). Kolb and Kalogeropoulou (2012) and Ali-Haapala et al. (2019, 2021) explored the idea that recreational dance is a form of adult play. Kolb and Kalogeropoulou (2012) found that classes imbued with discipline and constructive teacher feedback are experienced as

pleasurable because of the stable framework and clear guidelines they provide for achievement and progression. Ali-Haapala et al. (2021, p. 6) found that maturing recreational dancers want teachers to offer classes that “stretch” their minds and bodies. Maturing dancers reported experiencing pleasure and a sense of achievement when competing with their classmates and against their own “ageing minds and bodies” (Ali-Haapala et al., 2019, p. 9). The health and safety issues around offering challenging content in classes targeting maturing recreational dancers were not addressed by Ali-Haapala et al. (2019, 2021).

Little has been written on the relationship between recreational dancers’ experiences of expressivity and the links to pleasure and wellbeing. Krekula (2022) explored the temporal aspects of affective experiences during recreational dancing. Flow or feelings of optimal wellbeing may be experienced while dancing individually or as a group. Dancers may feel that they are becoming one with the music or time is slowing down. This intensely sensual and embodied experience encourages participants to continue attending classes. In this context, the maturing body is positioned as a source of “passion and pleasure” rather than a problem to be managed (Krekula, 2022, p. 239).

The combination of music and movement encourages self-expression and creativity (Paglione et al., 2024). Expressivity is closely associated with beauty and grace, and is highly valued by maturing dancers of all abilities (Houston, 2015). Dance also provides a means of managing emotions and stress by providing an escape from the pressures of everyday life (Maraz et al., 2015; Ono, 2015; Paxton, 2002). Dance offers adults an opportunity to make new memories (de Araujo & da Rocha, 2019) and reconnect with their youth and childhood (Houston, 2015; Paglione et al., 2024). The creative,

challenging, competitive, and pleasurable aspects of dance participation position recreational ballet as serious leisure.

Dancing has positive impacts on identity in adulthood

Recent literature on recreational dance has sought to shed light on the role that dancing plays in helping adults understand and cope with the physiological, psychological, and cultural changes that accompany maturing. It was found that adults of all ages engaged with and valued dancing to the extent that participation did not decline with age (Alfredsson Olsson & Heikkinen, 2019; Paulson, 2009). Adults persisted with recreational dance into their later years and engagement tended to be of a long duration. For example, Cann (2015) found that most participants had danced for 30 years or more. This continued relationship with dance speaks to the role of leisure in meaning making and a sense of purpose in adulthood (An et al., 2023; Iso-Aloha & Baumeister, 2023).

Encounters with dance can be transformative. Williams (2017) interviewed adults who claimed that their personal belief systems and worldviews changed significantly after encountering dance. Most had negative perceptions and little or no interest in dance prior to their encounters in adulthood. For the 38 participants in Williams' study, dance became a prominent activity, with three of them taking up dance-related occupations. Williams (2017) found that while dance may be transformative, recreational adults often have difficulty claiming the dancer identity. The words they used to describe their own experiences often revealed "a lack of faith in the authenticity of their own engagement, as well as the status of their dance-based identity" (Williams, 2017, p. 290).

For others, the transformations may be less dramatic. As adults mature, leisure is used to reconstruct their identity (de Araujo & da Rocha, 2019). Leisure interests may move to focus on activities that support their social needs, maintain cognitive health, or

promote enjoyment (An et al., 2023). Jeffrey et al. (2022) explored how a ballet class enabled women to examine their perceptions of maturing and challenge negative social discourses of decline. Ferm Almqvist (2022) studied the experiences of adults aged 65 and over in a contemporary dance class. The experience of dance was one of “being and becoming” (Ferm Almqvist, 2022, p. 14). Through dance and making dances, these maturing adults learned about themselves, reflected on their situations, explored their possibilities, and found the freedom to transcend the physical and social constraints of everyday life (Andersson & Ferm Almqvist, 2020). They became “meaningful bodies” (Ferm Almqvist et al., 2023, p. 21) who were felt, seen, heard, and taken seriously (Ferm Almqvist, 2020; Ferm Almqvist & Andersson, 2021). Through dance they challenged society’s expectations by doing “something other than what is normally expected from an elderly body” (Ferm Almqvist, 2020, p. 294).

Maturing adults who participate in Parkinson’s dance classes are an example of challenging social expectations. Houston (2015, p. 27) investigated a participant’s claim that dancing made her “feel lovely” and was central to her identity. This was an unexpected outcome of Houston’s research. Dance classes for adults with Parkinson’s are set up with physical health improvements as the primary goal. The importance of beauty and grace in wellbeing are often overlooked in dance for health programmes. Social stereotypes around age and disability exclude many maturing adults from being considered beautiful. Houston (2015) found that self-expression and feeling beautiful provided the dancer referred to above with a means of coping with and escaping from the realities of her condition. Jeffrey (2014, p. 18) found that the participants in the Dance for Parkinson’s pilot came to think of themselves as dancers, shifting from

“speaking of themselves as ‘patients’ or ‘people with Parkinson’s’ to using language and descriptors that identified themselves as dancers.”

Dance has positive impacts on social wellbeing

Loneliness and social isolation have negative impacts on all aspects of health and wellbeing for maturing New Zealand adults (Hall, 2015; Wright-St Clair et al., 2017). Supportive social relationships have been shown to noticeably reduce the incidence, progression and severity of frailty in later life (Williams-Farrelly & Ferraro, 2023). Fontanesi and DeSouza (2020) found that the social relationships and atmosphere in a Dance for Parkinson’s class directly contributed to participants’ improved health outcomes. Making social connections and belonging to a community are at the heart of many adult accounts of dancing. The desire to build social relationships with like-minded adults was the most frequently cited motivation for participation in dance (Ali-Haapala et al., 2018; Cooper & Thomas, 2002; Gavin & Myers, 2003; Goulimaris & Filippou, 2016; Nicholas et al., 2018; Paglione et al., 2024; Pines & Giles, 2020; Roberson & Pelclova, 2014). Younger adult ballet and modern dance participants were the exception. Career aspirations were their primary motivation for participation. The importance of social relationships increased as these participants matured and career opportunities faded (Nieminen, 1998). Shen (2020) and Shen and Rowe (2023) found that Chinese migrants living in New Zealand participated in community recreational dance classes as a means of increasing their sense of belonging and acculturation. The community dance context was viewed by migrants as inclusive and welcoming of adults from diverse backgrounds. Making meaningful social connections helps maturing adults cope with loneliness and boredom (An et al., 2023). The arts are particularly useful for promoting social connectedness (Perkins et al., 2021). Hansen et al. (2021) found that social relationships

established in a dance class became particularly important for maturing adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants who maintained classroom friendships experienced less social isolation and reported better body image than those who did not.

The social aspect of dancing is particularly important for adults managing health conditions. Participants in a Dance for Parkinson's class reported feeling beautiful and appreciating the opportunities to meet others who are going through similar experiences (Brook & Booth, 2022). Dancing together is a pleasurable and positive social experience (Houston & McGill, 2011, 2015, 2019). Fontanesi and DeSouza (2020) found that beauty and physical capability are socially affirmed and reinforced during dance classes. This positive group reinforcement impacted participants' beliefs about their physical capabilities and motor performance.

Recreational dance classes can also be safe social spaces for adults who are from marginalised communities or participate in stigmatised dance genres. Like maturing dancers, these participants challenge society's and the dance profession's expectations about who is a dancer and who can dance.

In classical ballet, obese, disabled and Rainbow LGBTQIA+ bodies are "non-normative" and excluded (Hill et al., 2016, p. 668). When carefully planned, recreational dance classes can be safe spaces for participants who do not fit into the codified norms of a particular genre. Scott (2021) recounted her own experiences of participating in adult ballet classes as a woman who identifies as queer femme. A diversity of body sizes, gender identities, ages, and abilities were welcomed. The non-competitive nature of these classes and the welcoming of diverse bodies made for an enjoyable and "freeing" experience (Scott, 2021, p. 11). Hill et al. (2016) explored how an inclusive body-positive

culture was constructed and maintained in a LGBTQ-friendly adult ballet school in the UK. A sense of community was created by promoting a culture of caring for self and others and encouraging participants to learn at their own pace and to challenge themselves to explore their potential.

The creation of safe spaces requires members to deliberately and actively foster a sense of belonging through building networks of social support (Beselt et al., 2023). The pole dancing community is an example of the success of this approach. Pole dancing is a highly stigmatised and marginalised genre (Fennell, 2022; Nicholas et al., 2018). Negative stereotypes have led to a “heightened sense of community” (Nicholas et al., 2018, p. 104). As a result, dancers do not view their participation as stigmatising (Kim & Kwon, 2019). Instead, participation is characterised by feelings of ease, a sense of achievement, self-confidence, body positivity, and feelings of autonomy and freedom (Dimler et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2022a; Kim et al., 2022b; Nicholas et al., 2018).

2.3.2 Adult-appropriate pedagogies in the recreational dance classroom

A small body of emerging research discusses teachers’ perspectives on appropriate pedagogies for the adult recreational dance classroom. This literature reveals a tension between traditional styles of teaching, the positioning of students in the teacher–student relationship, and new thinking around power and learner autonomy in educational practices.

Hills and Snook (2023) facilitated a focus group with seven dance practitioners who teach adults aged 65 and over. All agreed that the profession needs to address the deficit thinking around ageing and revisit the positioning of maturing adults. Dance programming should move away from an intervention focus to one that reinforces the

message that dancing is the expression of “exquisite joy” and provides dancers with an “opportunity for newness” (Hills & Snook, 2023, p. 214). The practitioners stressed that not all teachers realise that the experience of joy is a key driver in adult participation, and not all teachers can bring joy, creativity, and playfulness into the classroom. The ability to enact and nurture joy needs to be an essential part of teacher training and professional development. The practitioners added that attempting to identify an overarching best practice for teaching maturing adults is not beneficial. Maturing dancers are not a homogenous group and a one-size-fits-all approach to pedagogy is failing to meet the needs of the diverse populations of adult recreational dancers (Hills & Snook, 2023). More research is still required. Recent literature on pedagogies for recreational dance acknowledges the diverse needs of maturing dancers and the importance of joyful creative experiences (Graham, 2023; Magrath et al., 2022; Paglione et al., 2023).

The tension between traditional disciplinary “teacher-centered cultures” (Dragon, 2015, p. 25) and egalitarian, holistic, progressive, student-centred pedagogies is most noticeable in the ballet classroom (Alterowitz, 2014; Zeller, 2017). Whiteside and Kelly (2016, p. 22) found that some adult learners prefer the “autocratic teaching practices” traditionally associated with ballet. These practices emphasise perfectionism over the experience of dancing. For the dancers this is proof that they are “enacting an authentic version of ballet training” (Whiteside & Kelly, 2016, p. 22). These dancers seem to enjoy the experience of the “demanding teachers who deserve subservient obedience and acquiescent adherence to instructions” (Whiteside & Kelly, 2016, p. 22).

Authoritarian teaching styles are historically embedded in and intertwined into the patriarchal hegemonic structures of the organisations that control the teaching and

production of ballet technique (Alterowitz, 2014; Crow, 2021; Zeller, 2017). These approaches have been shown to negatively impact the mental health and wellbeing of dancers (Dryburgh & Fortin, 2010; Gallagher-Escobar, 2023; Kim & Choo, 2022; McEwen & Young, 2011; Millar, 2018; Radell et al., 2014; Thomson & Jaque, 2018; Wells, 2019). Perfectionism is central to traditional pedagogies and encourages “debilitative imagery, greater cognitive and somatic anxiety, and lower self-confidence” (Nordin-Bates et al., 2011, p. 58). Perfectionism inhibits creativity, enjoyment, freedom to make mistakes, and sense of self-worth (Lopez, 2019; Nordin-Bates, 2020).

Pedagogical change has been resisted by dance institutions as authoritarian methods “have long been considered not just inextricable from, but necessary for professional quality ballet training” (Zeller, 2017, p. 99). There is a slow move away from this tradition to progressive practices in all dance contexts (Birk, 2009; Choi & Kim, 2015; Crow, 2021; Richmond & Bird, 2020; Ritchie & Brooker, 2020). Progressive pedagogies focus on supporting the “physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual” needs of learners (Choi & Kim, 2015, p. 146). These changes recognise the importance of learner autonomy and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1986) in dance education.

Authoritative pedagogies may also be a barrier to the development of authentic, trust-based teacher–student relationships (Haraldsen et al., 2023). Such relationships require the teacher to “facilitate a supportive, unconditional, and trustworthy” learning environment (Haraldsen et al., 2023, p. 1). This is fundamental as the environment influences “the quality of the relationship and the wellbeing of both teacher and students” (Haraldsen et al., 2023, p. 1). Rathle (2018) argued that for this relationship to change, teachers also need to move from giving corrections to constructive feedback for improvement. Such a movement is central to supporting learner autonomy and

wellbeing. Authoritarian pedagogies also reinforce and reproduce traditional constructions of femininity in western theatrical dance (Marshall 2020, 2022). These have negative health and wellbeing impacts on female dancers. Marshall (2020, 2022) offered a blueprint for practitioners to help them reorientate their teaching practices and effect positive changes to the autonomy, self-efficacy and body image of female dancers.

The principles underpinning these progressive approaches are closely aligned to the educational philosophies of Freire (1972, 1995), Brookfield (1991, 1995, 2013a, 2013b) and the 'pedagogies of the possible' (Glăveanu & Beghetto, 2020). Together these philosophies highlight the importance of creativity and hope (Schwittay, 2023) in orientating learners towards "new and varied trajectories for learning and life" (Glăveanu & Beghetto, 2020, p. 1). Creativity is important for learners across the lifespan (Hanna, 2013).

Recent research in adult dance has provided examples of collaborations between teachers and learners that are designed to enable creativity. Newall de Jesus (2018) provided examples from New Zealand where companies and dance artists work with maturing adults to provide opportunities to learn and perform. Curwen-Walker, principal of a New Zealand adult ballet school, "believes in the importance of creating appropriate spaces and contexts for older adults to participate in dance" (Newall de Jesus, 2018, p. 23). Curwen-Walker stressed that programming provision for adults needs to be carefully considered. Adult dancers engage and thrive when they "feel it's their space, not just that they are being accommodated" (Newall de Jesus, 2018, p. 23).

Mattingly et al. (2023, p. 58) argued that professional ballet education requires a "hard re-set ... that prioritizes a learning culture of joy and creativity within ballet class." These

ideals are reflected in the emerging research around learning and teaching in the maturing adult recreational dance space.

2.3.3 Statistics and research on adult dance participation in New Zealand

Data on participation in recreation reveals that adults across the lifespan are actively engaged in a variety of dance genres. Statistics on recreational dance participation are collected by Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage, Statistics New Zealand, Creative New Zealand and Sport New Zealand.

Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage commissioned Verian to survey “1,745” New Zealanders on their cultural participation (Verian, 2023b, p. 5). Close to “one in three New Zealanders” (Verian, 2023b, p. 40) participate in performing arts events. The survey focused on attendance rather than participation in arts education or classes.

In 2021, Statistics New Zealand used the General Social Survey to gather information on active participation in dance, cultural, and recreational activities (Statistics New Zealand, 2022a). A total of “5.8%” of all adults surveyed and between “3.1%” and “5.1%” of those aged over 35 participated in performing arts classes at least once a week (Statistics New Zealand, 2022a, Table 3). No breakdown of dance by type is recorded in the General Social Survey (N. Saeed, Statistics New Zealand, personal communication, June 18, 2018).

In 2022, Creative New Zealand commissioned Verian to survey “7,000” New Zealanders on their engagement with the arts and culture (Verian, 2023a, p. 5). The study found that “6%” of New Zealanders aged 15 and over participated in dance (including ballet) (Verian, 2023a, p. 67). This was an increase from “4%” in 2017 and “5%” recorded in

2020 (Verian, 2023a, p. 67). Participation in dance, theatre, singing and other performing arts, excluding Pasifika and Māori cultural performances, were highest in Wellington (Verian, 2023a). No breakdown by age was given.

The Sport New Zealand Active New Zealand survey sampled “15,118” adults aged 18 and over about engagement in active recreation paints a similar picture of adult participation in recreational dance (Sport New Zealand, 2023d, p. 1). In 2022, “3%” of New Zealanders aged over 18 years old participated in “dance/dancing” (Sport New Zealand, 2023a, p. 58). Between “7%” and “19%” of those aged over 35 had participated in dance during the last seven days (Sport New Zealand, 2023c, Table: Participation adults – Last 7 days). Dance was a popular activity, ranking 13th out of more than 90 sport and recreation activities in 2022 (Sport New Zealand, 2023a, p. 58). It was also noted that “11%” of adults who danced lived in Auckland (all areas) and 10% lived in Wellington (Sport New Zealand, 2023b, Total Adults).

Data on participation in adult ballet in New Zealand is scarce. Other than a few articles in the media and brief mentions in statistical publications, adult ballet and adult ballet learners are invisible within the recreational and cultural landscape. Only one source of statistics has been published on the adult ballet sector in New Zealand. In 2015, Kopytko summarised the results of a DANZ survey of studios offering adult ballet classes. Five studios and dance projects responded, and 35 adults returned questionnaires. Most participants were aged from 40 to 60 years old. As reported in Kopytko (2015), DANZ surveyed adult learners about: their childhood experiences of ballet; motivations for participation as adults; benefits experienced from participation; and what information sources adult learners had used to find ballet classes.

The findings summarised in Kopytko (2015) mirror those reflected in the adult learner narratives and the research studies analysed in this review. These reveal that adults desire to participate in ballet classes and to be treated as serious learners. Kopytko strongly advised teachers to improve their marketing and their attitudes if they wish to attract and keep adult learners.

2.4 Finding adult recreational voices in the literature

The authentic voices of adult ballet learners are under-represented in the research literature. Their accounts of the lived experiences of being recreational dancers and their observations on the world of ballet tend to be found in the scholarly and grey literature. Eighty-seven resources containing discussions on various aspects of adult ballet participation and practice were identified in the grey literature. This small but rich body of accounts was found in book chapters, syllabus documents, popular media, videos, letters to the editor in professional dance magazines, and testimonials on adult dance school websites. A small number of accounts from teachers of adult ballet were also found. These provide valuable insights into the world of adult ballet, the men and women who choose to teach adults, and the sometimes uneasy relationship between recreational and professional dance. Together, these narratives help paint a picture of the phenomenon of adult ballet from the perspective of maturing women.

Five key themes emerged from the narratives of adult dancers and their teachers. These focus on:

- The adult ballet learning environment.
- Motivations for participation in adult ballet.
- The challenges and barriers to adult ballet participation.
- Benefits of participation in adult ballet.

- The meaning of ballet in the lives of learners.

2.5 Theme 1: The adult ballet learning environment

2.5.1 Adult ballet learners' experiences of dance

Four subthemes emerged from the narratives around adults' experiences of being learners in the ballet classroom:

- Teaching adults is different from teaching children.
- Adults want teachers who understand the maturing body.
- Adults thrive in supportive environments.
- Adults are achievement and progression oriented.

Teaching adults is different from teaching children

Adult ballet learners would like teachers to recognise that, unlike children, they come with prior life experiences. Adults are “starting again instead of starting from scratch,” wrote Lewis (2012, p. 36). Teachers should use learners' other sporting activities as indicators of what their bodies can and cannot do. Successful teachers of adult ballet are those who are confident, skilled, and allow adults to express their own personalities within the formal structure of the ballet class. McManus (2012) noted that many teachers of adult ballet are retired dancers who have no training in dance pedagogies or in teaching adults. They need to be educated about the challenges of teaching maturing learners and the impact that negative stereotypes have on this population. Hansen (2008) observed that adults have a lot of questions they want to ask and want answered. Adults cannot be expected to “listen and obey” when they know that an instruction or practice will lead to injury (Hansen, 2008, p. 10).

Adult learners want teachers who understand the maturing body

Morgan (quoted in McDonald, 2018) appreciated that teachers in her school were educated about working with adult dancers. Morgan's school:

is great because the teachers' knowledge with older bodies makes us older girls feel more confident. If the local ballet school said "we're now offering ballet classes for 35 plus" I wouldn't feel confident because they've spent all their career working with people who have tiny little bodies. (McDonald, 2018, *Ballerina Body Not Required* section, para. 3)

Adults thrive in supportive environments

Adult ballet learners Pechey (in Furness, 2016) and Peters (in Boyle, 2018), and New Zealand dancer Scannell (in Nichol, 2016), all credit the support and encouragement of their teachers as the source of their examination success. Gray (2017, p. 14) described how self-determination and a "good, supportive and enthusiastic teacher" helped him overcome the challenges posed by age and physical limitations. Johnson (2008, p. 10) described the joys of attending a school with an "all-inclusive team attitude". Adults are welcome to participate in all aspects of school life, including performances.

Adults are achievement and progression oriented

Progression matters across the age spectrum and examinations provide a measure of progress for adult learners. Sinclair (2012) noted that adults are motivated by achievement as much as fun. Adults desire to learn new skills, sit examinations, and collect certificates that demonstrate their competency. Sinclair (2012) complained that she had been unable to find a teacher who would train her for examinations and asked the RAD to clarify if they consider adults to be unsuitable candidates. Johnstone (2013) expressed frustration at how difficult it was to find a teacher who would allow her to sit the RAD vocational ballet exams. Pollard (2017) described the joy of sitting and passing four gold medal ballet exams as an adult. Similar sentiments of joy, pleasure, and increased confidence were expressed by Douglas (2012), Jobson (2012), Nichol (2016),

and Spink (2015). Four maturing New Zealand dancers from Christchurch passed the intermediate level Cecchetti ballet exam (Spink, 2015) and van den Broek reflected that the experience was “rewarding as hell because we all passed with decent grades” (Spink, 2015, para. 6). Preparation for the exam required a significant time investment from the dancers, commitment from their families, and support from the ballet school community.

2.5.2 Teachers reflect on adult ballet learners’ experiences

Discussions on adult-appropriate pedagogies from a teacher’s perspective are very rare in the professional ballet literature. Most accounts of interactions between teachers and learners are drawn from letters to the editor in dance industry magazines and two recent book chapters. Three themes emerge from the literature:

- Teaching adults is different from teaching children and adolescents.
- Teachers recognise that adults thrive in supportive environments.
- Teachers recognise that adults are achievement and progression oriented.

Recognition of adult learners’ desires for achievement and progression, and the need for teachers to understand the adult body, are largely absent from the literature. A key message in the sparse practitioner accounts is that teaching adults is far more complex than professional dance organisations and the sector may realise.

Teaching adults is different from teaching children and adolescents

Hills and Snook (2023, p. 206) interviewed seven dance teachers. One of their key findings was that adults are not a “homogenous group”. The diversity of ages and needs of adult recreational dancers are not reflected in the terminology used by the sector. The teachers reflected that in their everyday practice they needed to adapt to the

health, social needs and interests of the dancers in front of them. For this reason, increasing the “complexity and challenge” of class content has to be done with care (Hills & Snook, 2023, p. 212). The teachers also noted that the music they selected for classes was carefully matched to the needs of the dancers. Classes were focused on “individual learning and enjoyment” (Hills & Snook, 2023, p. 212) rather than a standard syllabus as would be used in child and youth classes.

Graham (2023) is one of the few authors to document the lived experiences of teachers of maturing adult recreational ballet learners. Graham (2023) interviewed three maturing teachers about their motivations to teach, preferred pedagogies, and perceptions of learners aged over 50. The teachers’ responses shed light on both the experiences of teaching and the characteristics of the learners who participate in adult recreational ballet classes. Graham’s participants spoke of the challenges of managing learner expectations, ensuring physical and emotional safety in the classroom, and the difficulties of having no prior training in teaching maturing adults.

The participants’ backgrounds in performance and teaching children did not prepare them for working with maturing adults. They felt underprepared to teach classes of learners with different levels of dance experience and physical limitations that needed to be accommodated. The participants also noted that moving to the adult classroom required a change of mindset from the production of talent to teaching for lifelong learning. All participants recognised to varying degrees that teaching adults required them to move from traditional authoritarian pedagogies to one “which seeks to offer a variety of models of learning and exploring” (Graham, 2023, p. 194). Tailoring class content to the interests and goals of learners was also considered important. One participant observed that she felt “really challenged by their [learners’] assumptions and

expectations. I found them quite rigid and intimidating” (Graham, 2023, p. 190). This comment reflects a belief that “the teacher student relationship is reciprocal” (Graham, 2023, p. 192) and the responsibility for changing pedagogical style and classroom culture rests with both parties.

The need to change thinking around teaching in the adult ballet classroom is reflected in articles published in dance industry magazines. These articles focus on raising awareness about the realities of teaching adults. Roses (1990) advised teachers that adults differ from children. Adult bodies are less flexible and daily classes are impossible for most adults due to other commitments. McCarthy (2006) stressed that teaching adults requires a change of perspective. This view is strongly supported by other authors. Teachers need to examine their own beliefs before teaching adults. Albert (2006, pp. 18-19) noted that:

a lot of teachers are just in it for the glory, they’re not interested in the student who is fat, or has no turnout ... to teach adults you can’t have hang-ups yourself, you’re teaching people who you know aren’t going to go on.

Watts (2014) advised teachers to let go of the stereotypes of ageing. Adults starting ballet classes are “not beginning people” (Watts, 2014, p. 156). Dickinson (2006, p. 10) noted that adult learners approach ballet with a level of focus and dedication which children do not have. This difference between teaching adults and children is reflected by other authors. Adults can:

take in and apply detailed instruction both anatomical and emotional. Because of this their improvement is often breathtakingly fast ... offering exams to adults gives them a sense of achievement which they may not find in their working or home lives. (Dickinson, 2006, p. 10)

A similar sentiment is reflected by Nachstern (2006, p. 10) who stressed that adult learners are “appreciative and there is no discipline problem.” Naik (2017) recommended teaching adults the ‘why’ or background story to steps and dances. Providing context helps adult learners understand and learn the movements. Howard (2012) suggested that adults value the structured approach of the traditional ballet class. They are self-motivated and attend class “for themselves, whereas kids often come to follow peers, or to live out their parents’ ambitions” (Howard, 2012, p. 43). Kibble (in RAD, 2018a, 6:05–6:34) advised other teachers that adult learners bring “a lot more maturity to the work than perhaps a younger student.”

Teachers recognise that adults thrive in supportive environments

Aidonpoulou (2007) and Roses (1990) noted that classes need to include dance and technical training. Variety and musicality are especially valued by older adult learners. This is reflected by Marris (2012), B’Nay (2007), and Burns (2006). Creating an environment of trust is very important. Howard (2012) found that women enter the studio awkward and self-conscious about their bodies. When treated kindly, Howard (2012) found, “most will blossom” (p. 40). Awareness of sensitivity around body image is especially important when teaching adults. Goodier (2012) described an incident in class with a learner recovering from anorexia in which they had:

inadvertently made a general comment about flabby bits not being held up, which raised general laughter – but she [the learner] disappeared for a month before finding the courage to return. It’s a constant learning curve even after all of these years. (p. 14)

Curwen-Walker, principal of a New Zealand adult ballet school, offers dance classes that “cater for all ability levels” and, as adult learners are “recreational dancers, it negates any requirements to be a certain size or shape” (Armah, 2022, para. 12). In Curwen-

Walker's school "there are no physical requirements other than you can stand on two feet" (Armah, 2022, para. 13).

Teachers recognise that adults are achievement and progression oriented

Feedback from the RAD Dance for Lifelong Wellbeing projects revealed that adults are motivated by progression. Watts (2014) reminded teachers that planning for progression is no less important when working with adults than it is with adolescents. Olenjnicki (2012) believed that offering examination opportunities and celebrating achievement is very important to adults. At her dance school, "adults take part in examinations if they wish. Our adults have just taken their Grade 6 RAD exam and passed with Distinctions – a credit to them indeed" (Olenjnicki, 2012, p. 11).

George (quoted in Maxted, 2014, para. 9) noted that some learners at her school "have reached grades 5 and 6 – 'heading towards a professional level' – and one graduate has joined a contemporary dance troupe. I can see that these women, of every age and size, are not only competent: they're graceful."

2.6 Theme 2: Motivations for participation in adult ballet

2.6.1 Adult ballet learners' motivations for participation

Very little discussion on the motivations for participation in recreational ballet classes was identified in the adult learner or teacher narratives. However, two key motivations were highlighted:

- Fitness and managing health issues.
- The pursuit of pleasure, happiness, and escape from stress.

The narratives of maturing adults in middle and later adulthood revealed similar motivations for ballet participation.

Fitness and managing health issues

Improving fitness and managing health issues in middle and later life were central themes in adult ballet learner narratives. Rule (2013, p. 39) noted that older adults do not like going to gyms. Hepözden, a New Zealand maturing dancer, said that she hates going to gyms full of:

sweaty, hairy men clunking weights around and grunting and groaning. You come into a ballet studio and it must be one of the few forms of exercise that you cannot express anything facially apart from this serenity and control. (“Silver Swans,” 2019, para. 9)

Gyms lack joy and seniors are not interested in the physical goals which are promoted in that environment. McManus (2012), Jobson (2012), Lewis (quoted in McDonald, 2017b), and Morgan (quoted in McDonald, 2018) expressed similar sentiments. They wanted to find a form of exercise that they could ‘stick at’. After seeing the athletic ability and strength of professional dancers, Bale (2012) thought that ballet would be a great way to improve her fitness. Te (2017) reported that pregnancy, age, and injuries are no barrier to maturing New Zealand adult ballet dancers continuing classes. Jordan danced at 21 weeks of pregnancy with no side effects, noting that “being pregnant has not impacted her dancing but she does get puffed faster and has to be careful about jumping” (Te, 2017, para. 6). Hepözden found that ballet improved her “balance, flexibility and wellbeing” (Te, 2017, para. 19). Arthritis and previous ankle surgery did not prevent Hepözden enjoying the experience. Castor tore her ankle tendon, which impacted her ability to balance, but found that “through the repetitive movements in ballet, I was able to get my balance back to almost where it was and I seem to have gotten back my ability to do everything I used to do” (Te, 2017, para. 25).

Weight loss was a common theme in the narratives of men and women. Gray (2017) remembered that as a teenager, ballet was central to his whole existence. He thought

that ballet would help reduce his middle-aged weight gain and relieve stiffening joints. Lewis wanted a way to manage her weight gain resulting from a thyroid issue (McDonald, 2017b).

The pursuit of pleasure, happiness and escape from stress

Few adult ballet learner narratives specifically attribute the pursuit of pleasure or happiness as a motivation for beginning ballet. Johnson (2008) and SU (2012) expressed a desire to experience the joy of dancing. Beasley returned to ballet after watching a performance. He recalled the joy and physical satisfaction of dance classes as a child (Albert, 2006). Lewis (2012) recorded that his passion for ballet began as a 15-year-old, after glimpsing a pair of soft white ballet shoes in the window of a dancewear shop. This experience ignited a lifelong desire to dance and a need to understand more about the secret world of ballet.

2.6.2 Teachers reflect on adult ballet learners' motivations

Teachers rarely commented on their students' motivations for beginning ballet classes. The themes in the teacher narratives focus on: making up for lost opportunities in childhood (Dickie, 2014; Graham, 2023; McCarthy, 2006); improving fitness and seeking the idealised ballet body (Graham, 2023; Howard, 2012); socialising (Graham, 2023); and the rejection of gym culture (McCarthy, 2006).

Hills and Snook (2023) added that maturing adult dancers were motivated to participate by the desire to experience joy and to have fun. A similar sentiment was reflected by Hogan (in Howard, 2012). Hogan, former RAD Director of Education, offered an alternative reason for the popularity of ballet classes. Hogan believed that modern lifestyles have caused adults to become alienated from their own bodies. Maturing men and women turn to dance to reconnect mind and body and to experience "pure joy"

(Howard, 2012, p. 40). For Hogan, “joy is central to ... why adult ballet has become a trend ... there’s something genuinely joyful about moving your body through space. We all know this as children, but many of us are socialised out of it” (Howard, 2012, p. 40).

2.7 Theme 3: Challenges and barriers to adult ballet participation

2.7.1 Adult ballet dancers’ experiences of challenges and barriers

The narratives contain rich accounts of the challenges adult learners face when participating in ballet. The challenges can be divided into six themes:

- Negative or traumatic childhood experiences of ballet impact wellbeing in adulthood.
- Physical capabilities of the maturing adult body.
- Attitudes of teachers and the ballet profession.
- Attitudes of the ballet profession to obese recreational bodies.
- Lack of performance opportunities.
- Being male in a feminine art form.

Negative or traumatic childhood ballet experiences impact wellbeing in adulthood

A prominent theme in the narratives of adult ballet learners who danced as children is deliberate abuse or rejection by ballet teachers and bullying from classmates in the studio and at school. Less frequently reported is bullying by parents of classmates and complete strangers.

As a child, Flowers “lived and breathed ballet ... the only problem was that while the other dainty little girls executed perfect pirouettes, I lolled about plumply in my black leotard, looking for all the world like a baby seal squirming on a rock” (quoted in

Sunderland, 2016, para. 24-26). Beasley loved to dance as a child until he was bullied and “the joy began to fade, so he gave in, and gave up” (Albert, 2006, p. 18).

Baines loved to dance from the age of three and recalled:

going to dance competitions and people would laugh at me even though I was winning some contests. Getting laughed at for your dancing and size when you are so young made me feel horrible. It’s a terrible thing to do to a young girl. (“Would-be Ballet Dancer Taunted,” 2014, para. 7-8)

Baines recalled placing in a competition and overhearing a parent say:

“I don’t know why that fat girl got placed, it’s not ballet. You can’t put a tutu on someone that size”. Another time I was on stage and I heard people laughing at me and I saw the other dancers on the side of the stage laughing as I performed. (Quoted in Palmer, 2014, para. 23)

Bell was 16 years old and size 12 when she won a place at a theatre school. Soon after arriving, a teacher told her to lose weight or her contract would be cancelled. Bell was devastated (Hodgkin, 2016). Roby was told by her teacher that “she was ‘too fat and too ugly’ for ballet (she was seven)” (Grant, 2014, para. 4).

Physical capabilities of the maturing adult body

Retraining the adult body after years of inactivity can be difficult. Gray (2017) discovered that after a 30-year break from dancing, his body and control over it had completely changed. He understood the mechanics of the exercises, but “my body simply wouldn’t obey my brain and I wobbled all over the place” (Gray, 2017, p. 26). For Angus, managing a sales team in London “was nowhere near as challenging as learning these [ballet] moves” (Howard, 2012, p. 43). McManus (2012) noted that overcoming physical impediments and health issues was a common theme amongst the adult dancers in her study. Garard was frustrated that her “body didn’t move the way I wanted it to ... my body will have limits and I shouldn’t expect the world from it, but I can still move within

my own space” (quoted in McDonald, 2017a, Adult Ballet Is Not Just For The Professional section, para. 1).

Ballet classes provide a means of overcoming the physical difficulties and changes that often accompany maturing. Morris, a maturing New Zealand dancer, had been “plagued by joint problems that ... led to two back operations, one hip reconstruction and three shoulder reconstructions” (White, 2018, p. 58). Thanks to ballet classes, Morris was able to move her arm and shoulder. She felt that “you might have gradual deterioration, but if you do something, you can also gradually improve” (quoted in White, 2018, p. 58).

Attitudes of teachers and the ballet profession

Hansen (2008) found that adult ballet classes are often taught by poorly trained teachers with little understanding of the adult body. This results in injuries. Hansen (2008) called for professional ballet organisations to publish more on the issues and needs of adult ballet learners. Johnstone (2013) expressed frustration with the difficulty of finding vocational level classes that will take adult learners. Johnstone (2013, p. 11) passed:

all of the RAD graded examinations as a mature student, but having attained a distinction in Grade 8 ... am now finding it very difficult to progress to the next level, as teachers are unwilling to include adults in their normal classes.

Morgan described being turned away from a ballet school at 21 years old for being fat:

[I] went back to dance in my 20s after four years away ... the ballet teacher told me I was too fat, and needed to lose weight, and wouldn't be able to come back to another class until I'd done that. (Quoted in McDonald, 2018, Ballerina Body Not Required section, para. 2)

Colquhoun (quoted in Symons, 2016, para. 6) wanted to join a ballet class, but was told by the teacher, “No, you're too old. Why don't you go home and have more children' ... that was a big downer; that affected me a lot.” Pidd (2014) reported that many of the

Big Ballet reality TV show dancers “had spent their whole lives as the butt of a joke. One woman attended an audition and was “told: ‘WeightWatchers is this way’” (Pidd, 2014, para. 6).

Attitudes of the ballet profession to obese recreational bodies

Recreational adult dancers in general rarely appear in discussions on the negative aspects of the ballet aesthetic. Most critical discussions about the body focus on professional dancers. In this review, three comments were found which explicitly articulate the ballet profession’s stigmatisation of the non-traditional, non-normative body. The three examples relate to dancers from the *Big Ballet* reality TV show.

Grant (2014) described choreographer David Nixon’s response to working with obese dancers. Nixon asked himself:

how the men will lift the dancers over their heads, or whether “big bone structures” can really achieve the required fluidity. The ballet dancer is like “a panther”, he argues, “not a rhino or an elephant, which are beautiful, powerful animals but [...] not elegant and fast.” (Grant, 2014, para. 8)

Responding to Nixon’s concerns, Wayne Sleep stated that he:

understands the point because he once shared the same doubts. “I would never have looked at somebody that size when auditioning,” he says. “They’d have been out of the room in minutes.” But it turns out that the 12-plus midriff isn’t antithetical to the “poise” and “light footwork” he was seeking. (Grant, 2014, para. 9)

On hearing about the *Big Ballet* project, Derek Deane the former director of the English

National Ballet:

points out to [Wayne] Sleep that it takes eight to nine years of training to make a professional dancer. “Fat, cellulite and large breasts; it just does not lend itself to the art form of classical ballet.” ... “But,” counters Sleep, “I’m not launching a ballet company. I just want us all to have a bit of a laugh.” (Taylor, 2014, para. 12-13)

Lack of performance opportunities

Ballet is a performing art and dancing on stage is the pinnacle of achievement. One of the common complaints encountered in the adult learner narratives concerns the lack of opportunities to learn and perform repertoire.

Descriptions of adult learners as participants in ballet performances are almost non-existent in the professional and scholarly literature. The inclusion of adults in ballet school performances seems to be an unusual occurrence. Ballet companies devoted to providing adult learners with performance opportunities are rare and recent innovations.

Big Ballet UK, the most internationally well-known recreational ballet company, began in 2013 as a reality TV collaboration between ex-Royal Ballet dancer Wayne Sleep, Rare Day Productions, and Channel 4 (Channel Four Television Corporation, 2014). The show aimed to challenge professional and public perceptions of the ballet aesthetic and who has the right to dance (Rare Day Productions, 2013a). Eighteen plus-size adults were trained by professional dancers and performed *Swan Lake* to an audience of 1,500 at St George's Hall, Bradford (Rowley, 2014). The three episodes of *Big Ballet* screened on television in the United Kingdom (Rare Day Productions, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c) and the United States (Robbins, 2014). Episodes were also available to international audiences on YouTube and NetFlix. Each episode of *Big Ballet* televised in the United Kingdom attracted over one million viewers. In each episode, the dancers described in explicit detail the discrimination and abuse they faced as children in ballet and as adults wanting to dance. The show created a media storm and opened public debate about the negative body culture in professional ballet, the bullying of children in dance education, the everyday discrimination faced by plus-size people, and the negative body stereotypes in

western culture. Big Ballet UK continued as a dance company after the TV show finished and is now open to adults of all ages and body shapes (Big Ballet Ltd, n.d.). The only reference ever made to *Big Ballet* in a UK professional ballet publication came in a letter to the editor of *Dancing Times* magazine. Cox (2014, p. 11) wrote that:

it was a joy to watch the pleasure on the dancers' faces at having the opportunity to dance ballet again. It is so sad that these ladies and gentlemen cannot find adult ballet classes to attend, and made me realise how lucky I have been.

Dodge (2015) reported on the increasing popularity of adult amateur ballet companies. The experiences of the London Amateur Ballet, Chelsea Ballet, Balletomane, and Big Ballet UK were highlighted. Linecar-Boulton of London Amateur Ballet noted that:

performing is what makes dancing. Doing class is such a small part of ballet ... dancing brings something special to life and being in a company means you're part of a community with other people who share the same passion for dance. (Quoted in Dodge, 2015, p. 23)

Wade of Ballet Bristol commented that:

none of us will ever be in The Royal Ballet but that's not why we do it. We enjoy performing and being part of a great classical ballet tradition ... our dancers are just as artistic and expressive as any professionals. It's an alternative vision for ballet – there isn't just one way to be a ballerina or dancer. (Quoted in Dodge, 2015, p. 25)

Krapf, the founder of Balletomane, is an adult ballet dancer who trained as a teacher. Krapf (2008, p. 10) noted that “most [adults] fear they missed their big chance to perform and that the opportunity has been lost forever. I created Balletomane as a way to help them achieve their dreams.”

Descriptions from adult ballet learners of their experiences of performing are rare in the grey literature. Morris and Hepözden, maturing New Zealand dancers, provided a

glimpse into the experience of attending an adult ballet performance. The dancers' friends and families were invited:

to cheer them on ... "My ex-husband actually cried," tells Rosemary. "I asked my son, 'Why did he cry?' My son replied, 'He said it was because you're all so old and the song was really good.' "I was on an absolute high when I finished it!" says AnneMay. "We performed to thunderous applause and we had to do it again. The only encore of the day!" (Prebble, 2019, para. 23-25)

Being male in a feminine art form

The voices of adult male ballet learners are almost silent in the professional and scholarly literature. McCarthy (2006, p. 27) observed that "not many men begin ballet in mid-life ... most men tend not to stay long, and usually I'm the only male in class. Initially it was a test of nerve, but not now."

2.7.2 Teachers reflect on adult ballet learners' challenges

Teachers of adult ballet learners are infrequently heard from in the research literature. This is also the case for the grey literature. Four key challenges were noted in the adult ballet teacher narratives:

- Learners are not prepared for learning in progressive classrooms.
- Learners have unrealistic expectations of speed of progression.
- Learners have unrealistic goals of a professional ballet career.
- The need for an adult syllabus.

Learners are not prepared for learning in progressive classrooms

Morrow (quoted in Graham, 2023, p. 189) noted that learners were challenged by their attitudes towards learning. Morrow noted that some adults "pretend that [ageing] is not happening". They expect to be able to dance with the same intensity and technique as children. She felt that this way of thinking has consequences for health and wellbeing.

Morrow feels that maturing learners are disadvantaged by their desire for “skill gaining, knowledge and fact” rather than a desire for self-discovery (quoted in Graham, 2023, p. 189). She feels that this is due to adults having “a preconditioned understanding of passive learning” (quoted in Graham, 2023, p. 193).

Learners have unrealistic expectations of the speed of progression

Like the teachers interviewed by Graham (2023), those in McCarthy (2006) noted that some learners have unrealistic expectations about the speed at which they can progress from beginner to advanced level. Natalie Brown found:

that managing expectations can be challenging ... “While most people are intelligent about it, an occasional student is unrealistic about what can be achieved ... [Brown] had to explain to one woman that she could not move quickly from a beginner’s class – that it is like learning a new language and required prolonged persistence.” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 27)

Learners have unrealistic goals of a professional ballet career

Lewis (2012) noted that experts say that an adult ballet learner could never become a professional dancer. Dancers, they claim, are “separated from the rest of humanity by virtue of their athletic superiority” and adult beginners could never achieve this level of fitness (Lewis, 2012, p. 36).

Lewis disagreed and noted that, with determination and hard work, it is possible for adults to build up the required flexibility, strength and stamina. These possibilities are reflected in the stories of adult learners such as: Peters, who passed the RAD Grade 7 exam aged 80 (Boyle, 2018); Pechey, who passed the RAD Grade 6 exam aged 71 (Furness, 2016); and New Zealand dancer Scannell, who passed the British Ballet Organisation’s Intermediate exam with high distinction aged 60 (Nichol, 2016).

McCarthy (2006) addressed the concern, widely held amongst the ballet profession, that teaching adults involves lowering standards. McCarthy (2006, p. 27) “asked Donna Schoenherr if the compromises involved in teaching adults were such that the experience became slightly unreal. There was not a lowering of standards, she replied, but it did mean a change of perspective.” This involves changing expectations, especially for teachers used to “rapid results from professional dancers” (McCarthy, 2006, p. 27).

The need for an adult ballet syllabus

Aidonpoulou (2007, p. 11) requested a “late-starters senior syllabus”. The RAD grade syllabus was useful for teaching children but was not designed to meet the unique needs and interests of adults. Sinclair (2012) took a similar position and added that if a new adult syllabus were created, more adults might choose to sit examinations and become more engaged in ballet.

Curwen-Walker, principal of a New Zealand adult ballet school, has a large cohort of maturing dancers. The classes started “in 2016 after a woman in her regular adult class felt uncomfortable next to skinny twenty-somethings” (Lang, 2018, p. 34). Curwen-Walker and her teachers recognised that the needs of maturing learners are different from younger adult learners. In response to this, Curwen-Walker designed her own syllabus specifically for maturing bodies. This was not an easy task. Curwen-Walker:

went into it not really knowing exactly what I was going to do, all I knew is I would need to modify. With my classical ballet teaching experience, I’m very aware of watching for injuries, potential injuries and safe-dance practice. (Quoted in “Silver Swans,” 2019, para. 17)

Curwen-Walker noted that “classes follow a traditional ballet class model, but warming up very, very well is important ... the mantra is to maintain their form ... it’s all multi-level” (quoted in “Silver Swans,” 2019, para. 20-21). Some movements are modified and

include “more stretch and balance which is important for older people” (Armah, 2022, para. 8). The learners are “still learning proper ballet technique ... [the teachers] provide a whole complete ballet class even within the limits of an older body” (Armah, 2022, para. 13-14). Curwen-Walker stressed that the dancers “want to feel like they’re doing ballet, if they want an exercise class they can go to yoga or to the gym ... I want to offer them everything a ballet class can offer but give them those modifications” (quoted in “Silver Swans,” 2019, para. 23).

2.8 Theme 4: Benefits of participation in adult ballet

2.8.1 Adult ballet learners experience numerous benefits

The benefits of participation and motivations to persist are the most frequently occurring topics within the narratives of adult ballet learners. Five key themes were identified in the literature:

- Joy, happiness, and embodied pleasure.
- Improved physical health and mental wellbeing.
- Increased self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Increased awareness and acceptance of the maturing body.
- Improved technique and technical progression.

Joy, happiness, and embodied pleasure

Underlying almost all learner narratives were experiences of joy, happiness, and pleasure associated with adult ballet participation. These narratives validate Hogan’s claim in Howard (2012, p. 40) that adults turn to ballet through a deep need to reconnect with their bodies and experience the “pure joy” of “moving your body through space. We all know this as children, but many of us are socialised out of it.”

Through ballet, Jenny rediscovered her love of dance and gained a new appreciation of what her body was capable of (Ashley, 2012). Howard (2012) found that the greatest benefit of ballet was emotional. Howard (2012, p. 43) relished the “rare, liberating feeling” that came from taking a risk and exposing herself to embarrassment. Rule (2013, p. 41) expressed the view that ballet is good for the soul and found joy in the “pleasure of being physically embodied, living in the sinews, which we give up when we put away childish things.” McCarthy (2006, p. 24) reported that learners find ballet intrinsically calming, deeply pleasurable, and that “small triumphs have enormous emotional impacts.” For Casey (2012, p. 16), ballet “is a very similar experience to meditation, but more enjoyable because it is a physical as well as mental discipline.” Lock found that “the feel good factor (of ballet) is immense and there’s a wholeness to it ... it touches your mind, body and soul” (quoted in Sunderland, 2016). For Morgan, ballet unlocks creativity through contemplation and mindfulness (McDonald, 2018). Scannell, a maturing New Zealand ballet dancer, found that “dance is something that completely engages her body and mind” (Nichol, 2016, para. 15). For Scannell, ballet is her time – “you can’t let anything else intrude on it” (quoted in Nichol, 2016, para. 16). Nachstern (2006) reported that, “on a good day, you blend so much with the dance you lose yourself in it. I don’t know why I didn’t feel this euphoria years ago as a child in ballet class.”

For Alison, ballet:

is wonderful because you are not just repeating the exercises, you are doing it with a meaning so there’s a feeling behind it and that you, when you listen to the music it comes from inside you so you get a real, a real. ... It’s difficult to describe, you get this real feeling of [breathes in deep, closes eyes] uplifting [sighs]. (In RAD, 2018a, 12:24–12:41).

Missed opportunities to learn ballet in childhood are frequently mentioned in the narratives. Financial cost and access to classes are often given as reasons. Adulthood is the time when many adults are finally able to realise their long-held desires to dance. De Guzman-Nicholson wanted to dance as a child. She had to wait until she moved to New Zealand because, “in the Philippines, only rich people could do ballet. I was one of seven kids, so we couldn’t afford extracurricular activities” (quoted in White, 2018, p. 57). For de Guzman-Nicholson, being an adult ballet dancer “is a dream come true” (quoted in White, 2018, p. 58). Waiwiri-Smith (2022, para. 2), a New Zealand dancer, recalled that “attending ballet class was a secret childhood dream of mine”. Waiwiri-Smith (2022, para. 5) reflected that “even if I spoke this secret shame aloud, I know my family wouldn’t have been able to afford ballet classes, and my dad would sooner have me play football or netball than dance in a tutu.” For Waiwiri-Smith (2022, para. 13) “stepping inside the class itself felt like stepping into my own imagination – this is exactly what four-year-old Lyric had pictured ballet to be.”

Morris, a maturing New Zealand dancer, felt that ballet had “transformed my life” (quoted in Prebble, 2019, para. 13). Morris and her classmate Hepözden “dance together four times a week, having added tap and jazz dancing to their repertoire, and they’re having a ball” (Prebble, 2019, para. 12). For Hepözden,

the thing that keeps us going is just the joy. There’s an absolute joy in it. I’ve never enjoyed going to the gym or anything like that. At the beginning, I wondered whether I could ever possibly do ballet. And now I think, ‘How could I not?’ (Quoted in Prebble, 2019, para. 26)

For Hepözden, like many other adults, ballet has become a calling. She found that ballet offered “something that held me, it was the challenge, it was the fact that there was a form to pursue, there was a perfection that I could aim for” (quoted in “Silver Swans,”

2019, para. 7). Hepözden enjoyed ballet “so much now that I’ve enrolled in five and a half hours of lessons a week” (quoted in “Silver Swans,” 2019, para. 10).

These learner narratives indicate that maturing ballet learners in non-competitive recreational and community settings experience feelings of optimal wellbeing while dancing. The narratives reveal that the pleasure and joy felt during class create meaningful experiences which contribute to participants’ overall sense of health and wellbeing.

Improved physical health and mental wellbeing

Popular discourses in western society associate ageing with inevitable “disease and decline” of the physical body and the mind (Schwaiger, 2006b, p. 12). The narratives of adult ballet learners in this review demonstrate that this is far from the truth.

A few weeks after resuming ballet, Gray (2017) could see improvements in his health and mental wellbeing. Ballet class “is exhausting, but after a class I also feel great, as if my whole body has been reinvigorated, recharged and made alive again” (Gray, 2017, p. 14). Bale (2012) found that her fitness level, strength, and posture improved when ballet became part of her weekly routine. Ballet participation helped Morgan manage her heart condition without medication. Morgan also credited ballet for giving her the courage to start her own business (McDonald, 2018). Participating in ballet classes gave Gerhard (2014) a feeling of empowerment and control. Ballet “filters into other areas of life ... having a positive impact on general everyday wellbeing” (Gerhard, 2014, p. 152). Ballet helped Hansen (2008) heal her back pain. She credits her improved health to the holistic nature of ballet and the joy-filled memories of childhood that resurfaced while dancing. At 51 years old, Douglas (2012) sat and passed the RAD Grades examinations with distinction. Ballet “requires fitness, concentration and an ability to perform”

(Douglas, 2012, p. 16). Weil, a maturing New Zealand dancer, started ballet classes in his 70s. Weil discovered that the “poise, grace and discipline” required make dance “an intensely physical and mentally demanding” activity (Weil, 2019, The Reality section, para. 1). Weil felt that “doing ballet is not easy” but it “is a great source of relaxation. I feel exhilarated and sometimes, as if I am flying” (Weil, 2019, The Reality section, paras. 3-4). Ballet helped Pechey lose five dress sizes, improve her flexibility, and increase her fitness. She claimed that she has now “got better balance than a lot of people that are younger than me, and I’m stronger too” (quoted in Furness, 2016, para. 21). Scannell, a maturing New Zealand dancer, reported similar benefits from ballet (Nichol, 2016).

Several dancers described the positive ways in which ballet contributes to their mental health and wellbeing. Read (2008, p. 10) credited the “power of ballet” and great teachers for his recovery from a nervous breakdown. Devine took up ballet in her mid-50s as a way of dealing with the emotional trauma of cancer. She “developed severe depression, which led to me leaving my busy and challenging job. It’s no exaggeration to say that ballet restored my self-esteem” (quoted in Sunderland, 2016, para. 13). For Hepözden, a maturing New Zealand dancer, taking up ballet:

coincided with a time in my life that was very frightening ... everything seemed to be going wrong. Although I didn’t have any huge, genuine, authentic urge to do ballet I was very much drawn to the fact that ballet had this appearance form, formality, containment and tidiness and that was the absolute antithesis of everything that was going on in my life. (Quoted in “Silver Swans,” 2019, para. 3)

New Zealander James returned to ballet on the advice of her doctor. She “had to learn how to walk again” after two spinal surgeries (James, 2017, para. 5). Not only did James recover from her surgeries, “she has noticed a huge increase in her energy and strength” (James, 2017, para. 6). James’ new “motto is: If I can, I will” (James, 2017, para. 21).

Increased self-confidence and self-esteem

Waiwiri-Smith, a New Zealand dancer, acknowledged that beginning or returning to the ballet studio requires a great deal of self-confidence. She admitted that “dressed in all black with a shaved head, septum piercing, and tattoos, I look more likely to dance in a grungy mosh pit than a ballet studio” (Waiwiri-Smith, 2022, para. 1). Waiwiri-Smith recalled that “the scariest thing about trying something new is the fear that you won’t be very good at it ... this is heightened when you begin an activity as an adult knowing there are children who are already experts” (Waiwiri-Smith, 2022, para. 22). After her first class, Waiwiri-Smith (2022) recalled feeling like a ballerina. She has no “ambition to land the lead role in Romeo and Juliet, or to perform to anyone outside of class – just learning an art form that always felt inaccessible to me is worth it” (Waiwiri-Smith, 2022, para. 24).

Waiwiri-Smith’s account reflects the concerns many adults have about fitting in and fear of failure. In their narratives, these concerns and fears are gradually replaced by stories of increased self-confidence and self-esteem.

The most memorable accounts come from the video testimonies of adults who trialled the RAD’s Discovering Repertoire programme (RAD, 2018a). When dancing, Carol felt “beautiful ... it’s not something I’d normally feel [laughs nervously]” (in RAD, 2018a, 8:40–8:49). Amanda felt that ballet “pushes me outside my comfort zone. I think as an adult we never, you know, never do that and it’s been great to take on that challenge” (in RAD, 2018a, 7:56–8:04). Andrea:

wanted to do the exam because I do like to still challenge myself with ballet. I don’t think being an adult really should stop you from challenging yourself and aiming for things, and really trying to become the best dancer you can be. (In RAD, 2018a, 9:26–9:40)

Catherina felt that returning to ballet was “just amazing and to feel those old moves coming back ‘cause I probably look a bit different, but I still feel the steps in the same way and I think it’s what you feel inside that counts” (in RAD, 2018a, 8:05–8:28).

Increased awareness and acceptance of the maturing body

Howard (2012) reported that ballet produces different health and wellbeing benefits to working out at the gym. Ballet has increased her body awareness, challenged her to take risks, and she:

is noticing parts I rarely pay attention to: my fingers and wrists, small bones in feet and ankles. The biggest difference, undoubtedly, is emotional. It’s been a long time since I’ve put myself in the position of doing something that risks making me look foolish in the company of strangers. (Howard, 2012, p. 43)

Garard described how her spatial awareness improved. Ballet helped Garard come to terms with the physical limitations of her body and taught her how to move within those capabilities (McDonald, 2017a).

The narratives reveal that dance studio mirrors heighten dancers’ awareness of the body. For those who danced as children, the mirrors sometimes remind them of their maturing status and the social stereotypes around who can claim the ballet dancer identity. Bridget and Stanbury, maturing New Zealand dancers, reflected on the memories of childhood that return while dancing. Dancing in class:

brings back memories – and in your mind, you’re skipping and doing pliés. You’re a dancer ... although it’s very fleeting ... because then you have to deal with the next movement and you’ve got the mirrors there, so you know it’s a lie ... but in your mind, it takes you back to when you did ballet as a child. (Quoted in White, 2018, p. 58)

Hepözden, a New Zealand maturing dancer, saw the humour in being an adult body in a youth-oriented art form. She stated:

I'm 180cm, over 100kg and I'm 63. ... I can't tell whether I'm the worst advertisement or the best advertisement for this! I do not look anything like a ballet dancer typically looks. On the other hand, I can still get out there and do it. (Quoted in Prebble, 2019, para. 19)

Improved technique and technical progression

Gerhard (2014) found that technical progression and greater mind–body cohesion come from working on basic ballet technique. Progression comes from “the mind and body in constant dialogue with each other” (Gerhard, 2014, p. 152). Jobson (2012) reported that at 60 years old and after three years of ballet, she is now taking classes in choreography and pointe work. Lewis (2012) noted that adult ballet learners often complete examinations with a view to training to become ballet teachers.

2.8.2 Teachers reflect on the benefits of adult ballet participation

Teacher narratives in the professional publications and scholarly literature contain very few observations on the benefits to learners of participation in adult ballet classes. The references to benefits that do exist fall into four themes:

- Mutual benefits for adult learners and their teachers.
- Joy, happiness, and embodied pleasure.
- Improved physical health and mental wellbeing.
- Improved technique and technical progression.

Mutual benefits for adult learners and their teachers

Mutual benefits for adult learners and their teachers are occasionally reported in the literature. Lord-Sole, Ballet Master for the WA Ballet Company, has seen huge improvements in the performance of company dancers who teach the adult classes. Teaching the basics to adults has prompted teachers to re-appraise and improve their own dance technique (Laurie, 2016). Ranger (2007) felt that teaching adult ballet is an

enjoyable experience and “over the years, [adult ballet] classes have been the only tonic to work” (p. 11). Schoenherr found that “dance is very healing for some people – to see someone’s self-esteem improve in class is immensely rewarding” (quoted in McCarthy, 2006, p. 27). Roses (1990, p. 37) reminded teachers that if they “enjoy giving the class, they’ll [the learners] enjoy taking it.”

Working with adult dancers can help dance artists feel comfortable with maturing selves. Jordan, a New Zealand choreographer, reflected on her experiences and found she:

is able to draw on her wealth of skills, experiences and insights to make work that is suitable for older dancers, that develops the performance skill of participants and also allows Susan to express her own creative artistry as an older choreographer. (Newall de Jesus, 2018, p. 24)

Joy, happiness, and embodied pleasure

The teachers interviewed in Hills and Snook (2023, p. 208) reflected on the fact that maturing adults attend their classes as they perceive “dance as a fun and joyful practice.” They added that teachers need to create a classroom atmosphere where joy and pleasure can come out. Greenlaw (2012, p. 16) recalled that her students found ballet classes “uplifting: especially when tired, counting the pennies and wondering whether to continue.” Naik (2017, p. 35) found that adult learners trialling the RAD Discovering Repertoire programme experienced “enjoyment and achievement ... vicarious pleasure ... [and an] absolute fabulous feeling.”

Kibble, an RAD teacher, reported that:

a lot of my adult learners have been coming to ballet for many years, perhaps they studied it as a child, had a break, had a family and they have come back to it and the child is still inside them. I think ballet is for everybody and everyone should have the chance to enjoy it at their own level. Certainly, the enjoyment and artistry, they have certainly

brought a lot more maturity to the work than perhaps a younger student. (In RAD, 2018a, 6:05–6:34)

Improved physical health and mental wellbeing

Teachers have frequently identified building new social connections as one of the many reasons adult learners attend ballet classes. Groves and Martin (2014) found that older adults experience a remarkable increase in their mental wellbeing and a reduction in loneliness and isolation. This change comes about through social connection and fun in class. Adult learners experience happiness and a “buzziness” when they discover they can move their bodies better than before (Groves & Martin, 2014, p. 41). McManus (2012) reported that learners benefit from improved flexibility, balance, and sense of musicality. Dickie (2014) found that loneliness is a serious issue for older adults. Attending dance company rehearsals helps keep memories active, improves social support, and self-esteem. Curwen-Walker, principal of a New Zealand adult ballet school, reflected on the benefits maturing adults experience from ballet. Coming to ballet class:

has helped alleviate symptoms of depression ... gives them [adult learners] a purpose for the day. It keeps the joints mobile. It really lifts their whole sense of well-being ... they are also dancing to gorgeous classical music – often what they grew up hearing – and that itself heightens their sense of wellness and makes them feel beautiful. It also gives them strength and balance and connects them with other people their age. (Quoted in Armah, 2022, para. 15-17)

Improved technique and technical progression

Watts (2014) believed that fun and the opportunity for progression encourages adults to persist. Making ballet examinations available to adult learners encourages them to develop and progress (Olenjnicki, 2012).

2.9 Theme 5: The meaning of ballet in the lives of adult recreational dancers

Few accounts from adult recreational dancers clearly describe the meaning of ballet in their lives. For those who reflect on this relationship, dancing is their pathway to freedom and transcendence. While the research literature discusses the benefits of dance practice for social connections, most adult narratives focus on the meaning of ballet within their own individual experiences.

For Morgan, “a world without dance is no world at all” (quoted in McDonald, 2018, A World Without Dance Is No World At All section, para. 1). SU (2012, p. 16) felt that “if you love ballet, ballet loves you back in a way that boys and chocolate cake just don’t.” Bale (2012, p. 16) “can’t now imagine life without dance.” Douglas (2012, p. 16) “cannot imagine not continuing ... no other form of exercise would give me the challenge, fitness and pleasure that ballet provides.” For Wheaton, ballet “sometimes feels as if I’ve died and gone to heaven” (quoted in Howard, 2012, p. 42). For Angus, ballet class “is my Covent Garden moment” (quoted in Howard, 2012, p. 43). At 67 years old, Cox (2014, p. 11) was “having the time of my life ... I really intend to keep going for as long as possible. The pleasure is immeasurable.” For Lewis, participating in adult ballet “fills a gap that is pervasive throughout adulthood ... we don’t as a society do social dancing like other cultures do” (McDonald, 2017b, A Warm Welcome and No Judgement section, para. 6). Ballet fulfils Lewis’s lifelong desire for music and dance; she can no longer consider a life without dance. Bundock stopped ballet classes:

at 16 when I was at boarding school. Ballet was perceived almost as ‘little girly’. I regret now that I stopped ... A few years ago I went to see The Nutcracker. I was very moved and realised how much I missed ballet. Now I try to fit in three classes a week. It gives me the most amazing pleasure and fulfilment – and most of all, real love, which I

would never get from aerobics in a gym. (Quoted in McCarthy, 2006, p. 27)

For some dancers, being able to take ballet classes is an adventure, an act of resistance and an affirmation of their maturing identity. Hepözden, a maturing New Zealand dancer, reflected on her first adult ballet class and remembered getting “the giggles ... I couldn’t believe I was actually in a ballet class ... there was some inner defiance – that you don’t have to be 20, 40 kilos and fresh of limb to do ballet” (quoted in White, 2018, p. 56).

A New Zealand maturing dancer, Weil, reflected on what makes dancing meaningful:

[I love] every moment of my classes. When I put my ballet shoes on, I am transformed into a different world – one of exquisite, gentle, graceful, beautiful movement. Usually accompanied by classical music, it can be achingly beautiful ... although I am dancing at a very basic level, I do not in any way feel deprived or frustrated. The joy of gentle, gracious movement is what has, still does and will continue to inspire me! (Weil, 2019, The Verdict section, para. 2-3)

2.10 Chapter summary

2.10.1 What we know about adult ballet participation

The lived experiences of adult ballet learners, the meanings of dance in their lives and the health and wellbeing impacts of dancing have received little attention from researchers. Much of what is known comes from popular culture sources such as letters in dance trade magazines, videos on the internet, testimonials on dance school websites, articles published in newspapers, and recordings from television news and current affairs shows.

The literature reveals that adults of all ages dance ballet for leisure and derive significant health and wellbeing benefits from these experiences. On their journeys to becoming

dancers, they often encounter personal challenges, structural barriers and social attitudes which impact their health and wellbeing. Professionals, as they mature, also encounter similar challenges and barriers from within the dance profession. Ageism has the effect of marginalising both maturing recreational and professional ballet dancers.

2.10.2 What we do not know about adult ballet participation

Extensive searches of a variety of literature sources revealed very little academic research on the experiences of non-professional adult dancers in recreational and community contexts. The impacts of ballet as leisure on women's health and wellbeing are largely absent from the New Zealand and international literature.

This study therefore seeks to contribute to the scholarly knowledge about adult ballet by exploring the following question and two sub-questions:

What are the lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes?

- How does recreational ballet participation contribute to health, wellbeing, and positive ageing for New Zealand women?
- What social and situational factors contribute to the creation of positive and meaningful pedagogical experiences for maturing women who participate in recreational dance?

A methodology blending perceptual (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, 1964/1968) and existential phenomenology (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, 1970/1972) with Goffman's dramaturgical framework (Goffman, 1959) is used to shed light on the meanings women attribute to recreational ballet and the impacts of participation on their health and wellbeing. These meanings and impacts are glimpsed through the dancers' reflections

on the social worlds and physical practices of ballet. The methodology underpinning this study is detailed in Chapter Three, “Methodology”.

Chapter 3 Methodology

To experience the dance is to experience our own living substance in an aesthetic (affective) transformation ... my dance cannot exist without me: I exist my dance. (Fraleigh, 1987, p. xvi)

This study seeks to uncover the meanings of ballet as leisure in the lives of maturing New Zealand women. Chapter One outlined the background and rationale for this project. Chapter Two critically contextualised the literature situating adult ballet learners within the beliefs and practices of professional dance. The current chapter examines key aspects of the three philosophical lenses through which the experiences of maturing female recreational ballet dancers have been viewed and interpreted. Chapter Three begins by positioning the study within a qualitative research paradigm. This is followed by a summary of the chosen philosophical concepts used to uncover and interpret the meanings women make from their relationship to recreational ballet.

3.1 Summary of the methodology

Qualitative research aims to make the “world visible” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Researchers seek to understand the meanings of a phenomenon in the lives of those who experience it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Qualitative approaches assume that the relationships between people, events, and objects are social, subjective, and experiential (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Researchers gather narratives and observations of these relationships and turn them into a series of visual or textual representations (Clark et al., 2021). New understandings of the meanings of a phenomenon are found in the interplay between the researcher and the participants’ experiences.

Dance is an embodied phenomenon. This study therefore uses a methodology blending perceptual phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, 1964/1968), existential

phenomenology (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, 1970/1972) and Goffman's dramaturgical framework (Goffman, 1959, 1963b) to reveal the bodily and social experiences of ballet. The writings of these theorists provide a means for understanding how individuals shape and are influenced by the social worlds in which they exist (Lee, 2020), how they collaborate to create new communities, and how they use these organisations to navigate the social stereotypes that hinder their pursuit of transcendence and freedom. This blended methodology is congruent with the overarching research question and sub-questions which aim to reveal the lived experiences, meanings, and health and wellbeing impacts of recreational ballet on the lives of maturing women.

In this study, individuals are viewed as members of social groups within a wider society. This worldview is reflected in the interpretive paradigm, relativist ontology, and social constructionist epistemology underpinning this research. These concepts or assumptions about the human experience are described in the sections following.

3.1.1 Interpretive paradigm

A research paradigm is defined as a "basic belief system or worldview" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). Paradigms, or sets of beliefs about the world, act as roadmaps for researchers, and are used to ensure that the project's aims and methods align. The researcher's chosen paradigm provides guidance on the nature of reality, what constitutes knowledge, and which methodologies are appropriate for data collection and analysis. The meaning-making focus of this project calls for the use of an interpretive paradigm.

The interpretive paradigm provides a framework for studying and interpreting human actions, interactions, and social processes. Interpretivism claims that the social world

cannot be studied using positivist or scientific models (Clark et al., 2021). Reality is individual and socially constructed. Multiple realities are therefore possible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Scotland, 2012). In the interpretive paradigm, the researcher collects individual perspectives on an experience and reconstructs a common representation of reality. The existence of many realities is reflected in the varieties of ways women in this study perceived their experiences of the recreational and professional ballet worlds.

3.1.2 Relativist ontology

Ontology is the “study of being” (Clark et al., 2021, p. 27) or “the form and nature of reality” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). Beliefs about what is real and what is not determine what a researcher and participants can know. This project is grounded in a relativist ontology. Relativism argues that reality is subjective and varies depending on the social context and individuals’ perceptions of their experiences (Crotty, 1998). This positioning acknowledges that the women in this project may have different understandings of the recreational and professional ballet worlds from younger or professional dancers.

3.1.3 Social constructionist epistemology

Epistemology considers the following questions: What is knowledge, and how is it created, acquired, and justified (Steup & Neta, 2024)? Epistemology is concerned with how individuals make sense of and give meaning to their experiences (Crotty, 1998). This project is rooted in a social constructionist epistemology. Social constructionism “asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being created by social actors” (Clark et al., 2021, p. 28). Knowledge, meaning, and reality are constituted and reinforced through social interactions, language, and cultural processes (Crotty, 1998).

From a constructionist perspective, the body (Shilling, 2012), gender (Alsop et al., 2002), and learning (Ackermann, 2001) are all social constructs.

According to Belenky et al. (1996), women see, interpret and embody their worlds using five types of knowledge, each of which marks a step towards liberation and freedom from oppression. These “five epistemological categories” are passive “silence”, “received knowledge” from others, “subjective” knowing, “procedural knowledge” and “constructed knowledge” (Belenky et al., 1996, p. 15). In this project, women are positioned as having “constructed knowledge” (Belenky et al., 1996, p. 15). They are critical thinkers and active creators of new knowledge and meanings about themselves and their worlds (Code, 1991). In addition to the five epistemological strategies outlined in Belenky et al. (1986), these women also possess “embodied ways of knowing” (Barbour, 2018b, p. 221). Barbour (2018b, p. 221) defined this sixth strategy as “embodied knowledge”. Through this lens, “woman views all knowledge as contextual and embodied. She experiences herself as creator of, and as embodying knowledge, valuing her own experiential ways of knowing and reconciling these with other strategies for knowing, as she lives her life” (Barbour, 2018b, p. 221). Women are no longer silent, “voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 15). In essence, this knowledge represents the ‘feltness’, intuition, and anatomical knowing a woman possesses about her body and the bodies of others (Barbour, 2011, 2018a). Women are active participants in the selection and use of the knowledge they create and encounter in their social worlds. This positioning of embodied knowledge as empowering and supporting transcendence provides a positive counterbalance to negative views of feminine knowledge as discussed in section 3.4.

In the context of this project, knowledge creation and acquisition are a corporeally grounded experience. The non-dualist maturing female body is placed at the centre of perception. This body-subject creates, shares, and acquires knowledge through a continual two-way dialogue with others and objects in its world. This epistemological position is underpinned by a belief that women actively experience and create ballet through their maturing bodies. Within the world of professional ballet these same bodies limit women's access to knowledge and learning opportunities. These maturing female dancing body-subjects influence and are influenced by others in the social and cultural worlds they inhabit.

3.1.4 Methodologies

In qualitative research, the methodology details the philosophical and theoretical foundations that shape the researcher's approach to knowledge creation, interpretation, and representation of meanings (Crotty, 1998). Existential phenomenology and Goffman's dramaturgical theory are the chosen methodologies for this project. Each highlights in its own way the social construction of being and body, and the role of reciprocity in intersubjectivity. These philosophical perspectives are methodologically congruent with the interpretivist paradigm (Clark et al., 2021).

Phenomenology "focuses on how individuals make sense of the world" (Clark et al., 2021, p. 26) and is grounded in the belief that "social reality has meaning for human beings and therefore human action is meaningful ... people act on the basis of the meanings they attribute to their acts and the acts of others" (Clark et al., 2021, p. 26). Creswell and Poth (2018) and van Manen (1997) recommended using phenomenology for research questions investigating the essence of lived phenomena. Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2002, 1964/1968) perceptual phenomenology and de Beauvoir's (1949/1993,

1970/1972) existential phenomenology provide lenses through which the experiences of being a maturing feminine dancing body-subject can be explored.

Merleau-Ponty and de Beauvoir are existential phenomenologists. Existential philosophy is concerned with the illumination of the essential themes associated with human existence in the world (von Eckartsberg, 1998). Existential phenomenology highlights the centrality of the body in human experience. This body is non-dualistic in nature (Fraleigh, 1987). One's own body, *le corps propre*, is the subject of perception, the standpoint from which the world is perceived and experienced (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 93). Existential phenomenology emphasises the unity between the body and the world. This social body is a "lived body" (von Eckartsberg, 1998, p. 11). Williamson (2016, p. 280) described this relationship between body and world as the "inescapable embeddedness, vulnerability and ambiguity of our human earthly lives". Merleau-Ponty offered an account of the relationship between the lived body and the world. de Beauvoir offered an account of how the feminine lived body is shaped through an individual's interaction with their social world.

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory that examines how individuals communicate in groups. It explores the shared cultural meanings derived from the symbols, gestures, and language used during these interactions (Crotty, 1998). From this perspective, social structures, and institutions are created and maintained through ongoing face-to-face interactions (Carter & Fuller, 2016). Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory provides a view of the social world in which adult recreational ballet is performed and where maturing women become ballet dancers.

It should be noted that the writings of Merleau-Ponty, Goffman, and de Beauvoir use heavily gendered language reflective of the social attitudes of their time, the

conventions of academic writing, and the choice of language used in the English language translations.

The remainder of this chapter summarises the key philosophical concepts that underpin this project and explores how each perspective contributes to understanding the meaning of recreational ballet in the lives of maturing New Zealand women.

3.2 Merleau-Ponty and perceptual phenomenology

3.2.1 Merleau-Ponty and the primacy of perception

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) was a French existentialist philosopher and the father of embodiment phenomenology (van Manen, 2014). He viewed phenomenology as the “study of the essences” of our lived experiences within a social world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. vii). Central to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is the belief that we first experience and engage with others, things, and events through sensory perception. Perception is an embodied phenomenon, “not a mental event occurring at the end of a chain of physical causes and effects” (Carman, 2008, p. 26).

3.2.2 Mind and body are unified

For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness or human subjectivity is embodied (Moran, 2002; Romdenh-Romluc, 2012; van Manen, 2014). The body and mind are a gestalt (Merleau-Ponty, 1947-1961/1964, 1964/1968) or a “unified whole” that cannot be reduced to its parts (Romdenh-Romluc, 2012, p. 106). This non-dualist body or body-subject is central to understanding all aspects of being (Moran, 2002; Romdenh-Romluc, 2012; van Manen, 2014). Consciousness and the world, meaning and being, are intricately intertwined through the medium of the body. Fraleigh (1987) stated that the dancer’s

being and identity are shaped and experienced through dance. For Fraleigh and other writers, the physical body and consciousness are inseparable, such that “to experience the dance is to experience our own living substance ... to express the dance is to express the lived body in an aesthetic form ... I exist my dance” (Fraleigh, 1987, p. xvi).

3.2.3 The intentional arc connects us to our world

Intentionality is central to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of embodied being-in-the-world. We interact with our world through an “intentional arc” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 157). This arc is created by the body’s sensorimotor skills, the body schema, and motor intentionality or “skillful action” (Jackson, 2018, p. 2). This arc produces a meaningful unity between the anatomical body, embodied consciousness, and the world (Moran, 2002).

At the heart of motor intentionality is the notion of ‘I can’. ‘I can’ and its role in skill acquisition has attracted much interest from dance and sport phenomenologists. Purser (2018b, p. 328) defined ‘I can’ as “the habit-body experienced as our potential for engagement with the world.” Inherent in Purser’s definition is the past (experienced as sedimented movement habits incorporated into the dancer’s corporeal schema), the present, and the future. ‘I can’ represents an individual’s “practical possibilities” and potentiality for movement (Braude & Shulman, 2018, p. 186). ‘I can’ is enriched by learning new skills (Fraleigh, 2017). For the dancer, ‘I can’ is “a state of availability, a felt sense of one’s capacity that affords diverse options in the dancer’s ability to adapt, respond, and articulate” (Braude & Shulman, 2018, p. 188). ‘I can’ offers the possibility of self-transcendence and transformation, “for the self to free even the self from itself, the ‘I’ in ‘I can’” (Braude & Shulman, 2018, p. 204). For the dancer, ‘I can’ is about exercising agency and freedom.

3.2.4 My body schema situates me in the physical and social world

The concept of body or corporeal schema is central to Merleau-Pontian phenomenology (de Sousa, 2019). Merleau-Ponty defined 'body schema' as "a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 103). The body schema is both a physical and social phenomenon. Our corporeal schema is developed through internal sensations and external body images formed by our interactions with other body-subjects (Purser, 2011, 2018b). The body schema is our "precognitive familiarity with ourselves and the world we inhabit" (Carman, 2008, p. 106).

In Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, the corporeal schema is the basis of social relations. Perception and the social world depend on the existence of a corporeal schema. Not only does our schema incorporate the meaningful objects around us, it also encompasses other body-subjects. Merleau-Ponty referred to the body of the other as a "miraculous extension" of one's own intentionality (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 370). For Merleau-Ponty, the "transfer" or "extension" of the corporeal schema enables empathy, and allows for the creation of unified social and cultural worlds.

Dancers possess a heightened awareness of their own corporeal schema and that of other dancing body-subjects (Purser, 2011). The concept of the transfer or extension of this schema is particularly important. In the studio, new dance steps are incorporated into the body by mimesis or imitating the teacher, choreographer, or fellow dancers. Dancers observe other dancing body-subjects in the mirror, and while partnering or dancing in groups (Purser, 2018a, 2018b, 2019). Dancers are observed by their audience. The audience members are co-participants incorporated into the flesh of the dance and the dancer (Midgelow, 2015). This connection grows as dancers mature and become increasingly attuned to themselves and others (Schwaiger, 2008). Injured or maturing

dancers develop kinaesthetic empathy and feel the movements of other body-subjects within their own corporeal schema (Parviainen, 2002). This corporeal reflexivity and corporeal schema underpin many of the lived experiences of the maturing dancing body-subjects in this study.

3.2.5 The social world is made of flesh

Merleau-Ponty's later writings focus on the nature of the social world and our relationships to others. We exist together in a shared world made of flesh. Here, flesh is "not matter, is not mind, is not substance ... flesh is in this sense an 'element' of being" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 139). Flesh is the fabric or material common to our bodies "into which all objects are woven" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. 273). The objects we perceive and the social world we inhabit are incorporated in this "universal flesh" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 137). The term flesh is used to describe the unity between body and world (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968). We are in a constant two-way dialogue with others and are "ontologically interdependent" (Daly, 2019, p. 10). Merleau-Ponty described this intertwining of ourselves and the other as a chiasm (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968). Through the chiasm, "we become the others and we become world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 160). This chiasmic relationship is characterised by reversibility of sensory perception and the "reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 138). Reversibility is illustrated in our ability to see and be seen, and to touch and be touched by others.

Merleau-Ponty's world is one of "intercorporeal being" (Moran, 2013, p. 364) based on "mutual awareness" and "reciprocity of perception" (Purser, 2019, p. 255). Perception of others takes place in the space between flesh. Merleau-Ponty referred to this space as the 'interworld', the "world that is common to us" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p.

269). This interworld is a natural and socio-historical space (Toadvine, 2009) constituted through shared symbolism and language (Moran, 2013). Language and expression enable the creation of a common experience of the world. Meaning emerges through the blending of my perspective with that of others. Intercorporeality and the social world are at the heart of the experience of dancing.

3.2.6 Merleau-Ponty offers valuable insights to this project

The lived experience of maturing women who participate in adult recreational ballet is the focus of this project. Merleau-Pontian perceptual phenomenology provides researchers with a way of seeing what it is like to be a maturing woman who is learning to incorporate new movement skills, language, and culture into her corporeal schema, identity, and world. Merleau-Ponty's focus on the intercorporeal social world aligns with the findings in the literature on the increasing importance of social connections and being with like-minded people as we age. His existential phenomenology is congruent with the goals and ethos of this project, and his writing on perception, embodied subjectivity, intentionality, corporeal schema, intercorporeality, and expression are key to illuminating the essence of being an adult ballet dancer.

3.2.7 Critics of perceptual phenomenology

Dance scholar Maxine Sheets-Johnstone features prominently in the discussions of the philosophy underpinning dance phenomenology. Sheets-Johnstone argued for the primacy of consciousness over perception during movement (Sheets-Johnstone, 1981, 2016, 2018, 2019; Sheets-Johnstone & Cunningham, 2015) and is highly critical of certain aspects of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. She has asserted that among Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological failings are: his belief that consciousness was a function of location

rather than movement (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, 2018); his disregard for the role of tactility in human development (Sheets-Johnstone, 2016); and his overlooking of the felt “hereness” of being in a living body (Sheets-Johnstone, 2019, p. 6). While of concern to wider discussions of Merleau-Pontian perceptual phenomenology, these aspects are not relevant to the lived experiences recounted by the participants in this study.

3.2.8 Accounting for the feminine in Merleau-Pontian phenomenology

This research focuses on the lived experiences of maturing women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes. It is therefore necessary to address the feminist critique of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Feminist phenomenologists, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Iris Marion Young, and Judith Butler, have critiqued Merleau-Ponty for universalising the body, ignoring the role of gender, and ignoring diversity by heterosexualising the embodied experience (Daly, 2019). It is claimed that the voice and values of the feminine are ignored. At the heart of this argument is Young’s (1980) article on feminine comportment and the ambiguous transcendence, inhibited intentionality, and discontinuous unity resulting from male sexual objectification of women. Ten years later, Young (1990) revisited some of her claims and retracted them.

Not all feminist writers are critical of Merleau-Ponty’s approach to embodiment. Preston (1996) argued that Young grossly misunderstood Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of embodiment. Preston critiqued Young for having based her research on the assumption that the embodied experience described by Merleau-Ponty was masculine. Preston (1996, p. 168) noted:

These criteria not only have no basis in Merleau-Ponty’s framework, but some of them actually fly in the face of its central provisions. In short, it is Young, and not Merleau-Ponty, who forces feminine embodied experience to appear as a deficient mode of experience,

and thus Young, and not Merleau-Ponty, who takes masculine embodied experience as normative.

Daly (2019) reminded readers that, like the body-subject, Merleau-Ponty was a man of his time and his philosophy is rooted in his historical and social context. That aside, Daly argued that the feminist criticisms noted above do not stand up to close analysis. Merleau-Ponty's view of sexuality is "anything but dualist or objectifying the other" (Daly, 2019, p. 5). To Merleau-Ponty, the body is a "non-dualist relational ontology" (Daly, 2019, p. 3). In response to the criticism that the philosopher does not account for the lesbian experience, Daly (2019, p. 4) noted that Merleau-Ponty was a man and therefore could not have "direct experience of" being a lesbian.

The emphasis on the intersubjective nature of embodiment means that vulnerability to others and the capacity to care are inherent characteristics of the body-subject. Vulnerability, care, and empathy are central to feminist ethics and the core feminist ethos of diversity. Daly (2019) argued that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology supports women and diversity, and is inclusive of all genders.

The lived experiences of middle-aged women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes are the focus of this project. The conceptualisation of the "lived body", the focus on the experience of embodiment, and the positive treatment of the feminine makes Merleau-Ponty's philosophical approach congruent with this project.

3.3 Erving Goffman and the presentation of self

Erving Goffman (1922–1982) was a sociologist and leading theorist of the symbolic interactionism movement. Symbolic interactionism examines how society is created and maintained through face-to-face social interactions (Carter & Fuller, 2016). Goffman examined social life from the perspective of drama, ritual, and game.

Goffman has been heavily critiqued for his negative views on human behaviour (Williams, 1986), his theories not being theories at all (Verhoeven, 1993), perpetuating racial stereotypes (Tyler, 2018), and lacking testable hypotheses (Reynolds & Herman-Kinney, 2003). Psathas (1996, p. 386) reminded readers that “Goffman was criticized for not being this or that, not taking this position or that, [but] he simply ignored his critics and went about his work.” Goffman’s writings are heavily gendered and use racial terms which would not be acceptable today. These are a reflection of the historical and social context of America in the 1950s and 60s. Despite these criticisms, Goffman is viewed as one of the most influential sociologists of the 20th century. His writings on the role of self-presentation and social stigma are still relevant today.

Goffman’s most well-known work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959), offers a micro-analysis of the motivations and strategies underpinning the management of personal impressions in social interactions. Goffman likened these social encounters to theatrical performances. Fundamental to Goffman’s dramaturgical framework is the idea that “ordinary social intercourse is itself put together as a scene is put together, by the exchange of dramatically inflated actions, counteractions, and terminating replies” (Goffman, 1959, p. 78). The concepts outlined in Goffman’s dramaturgical framework formed the basis of his subsequent writing on stigma, interaction rituals, and public behaviour.

Goffman’s most notable contributions to social theory include: highlighting the role of the body in human agency and social interactions; calling attention to the ways social norms shape and constrain behaviour; and making visible the structures of intercorporeality underpinning intersubjective experience (Crossley, 1995; Dolezal, 2017; Shilling, 2012). Goffman moved the body from being taken-for-granted to having

cultural and social significance (Balaita, 2016). In doing so, Goffman forced sociology to confront the inequalities in mid-20th century North American society (Williams, 1986) and to look at the body and embodied social relations in a new way (Psathas, 1996). Crossley (1995, p. 133) described Goffman as a “radical, corporeal sociologist, who has broken with the Cartesian moorings of traditional sociology.”

Goffman’s focus on the structures of embodied social interactions led authors to explore the possibility that he may have been a phenomenologist in sociologist’s clothing. While Goffman wrote about the taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life and intersubjectivity as a phenomenon, they concluded that he was not a phenomenologist (Lanigan, 1988; Psathas, 1996; Smith, 2005).

3.3.1 Reality is make believe

For Goffman, all social life is an “interplay between manipulation and morality” (Branaman, 1997, p. lxiv). Human behaviour serves to affirm, maintain, and reproduce the social order and reality within a given setting. Goffman viewed reality as a social construct enacted through embodied relations between individuals (Dolezal, 2017). Everyday life and its activities are undertaken in the company of others and are “socially situated” (Goffman, 1983, p. 2). Theatrical performances were used as a metaphor for the creation and sustaining of reality. A performance was defined as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (Goffman, 1959, p. 26). Social interactions are “reciprocal” (Goffman, 1959, p. 26) and involve one performer attempting to convince others that their character impersonation and impression of reality is genuine. During encounters, individuals make inferences on the authenticity of a situation based on: the information they gather about the context; the voluntary and involuntary cues given off by the

performer; and their own expectations and prior experiences of the social norms within that setting. Performers wear social masks which conceal their “‘true’ or ‘real’ attitudes, beliefs, and emotions” (Goffman, 1959, p. 13). It is difficult to determine who a performer really is beneath their mask. For these reasons, Goffman considered reality to be “make-believe” (Goffman, 1959, p. 9).

3.3.2 Becoming oneself through social interactions

For Goffman, action is being: to engage in a particular type of activity is to be that kind of person. (Williams, 1986, p. 354)

Central to Goffman’s definition of reality is the performer’s self. This self is intercorporeal (Dolezal, 2017). It is continuously created and recreated with each interaction between the performer and others (Hafermalz et al., 2016). This self is constructed from “verbal and corporeal signs and it depends on social validation” (Balaita, 2016, p. 105). Goffman identified two types of self. The first is an “all-too-human” inner self and a “socialized” self (Goffman, 1959, p. 63). The second inner self or “single look” consists of the fundamental psychological and biological characteristics of the performer (Goffman, 1959, p. 229). Goffman (1959, p. 229) noted that this self is “a naked unsocialized look” subject to “variable impulses with moods and energies that change from one moment to another” (Goffman, 1959, p. 63). For a performance or social interaction to be successful, the performer is required to hide their human self beneath a character mask.

3.3.3 Maintaining face during social interactions

An individual’s public persona or face is “only on loan to him [sic] from society” (Goffman, 1972, p. 10). Successfully performing the self requires the performer to

maintain face during social interactions. Central to Goffman's social theory is the role of the physical and metaphorical face in social interactions. Face is defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [sic] by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman, 1972, p. 5). 'Face-work' is Goffman's term for the strategies performers use to maintain and stay in character. To stay in character is to "maintain face" (Goffman, 1972, p. 6). Performers use a variety of strategies to show deference or respect for the social order of a particular setting. Dolezal (2017) noted that face-work is made possible by an internalised, pre-reflective set of shared embodied norms expressed through the body idiom.

3.3.4 Life is a theatrical performance

Goffman (1959) devoted a lot of time to describing how teams strategise and stage performances of social identity. At the heart of these performances are individuals who assume a variety of character roles and personal fronts depending on the situation.

Teams are the fundamental social unit

Teams are "the fundamental unit" for examining social interactions (Goffman, 1959, p. 85). A team is defined as "a set of individuals whose intimate cooperation is required if a given definition of the situation [reality] is to be maintained" (Goffman, 1959, p. 108). Team members work together to present an impression of reality based on the stereotypes or norms of their group "tradition" (Goffman, 1959, p. 18). The purpose of cooperation is to protect the identities of the team and individual members. Teams often resemble secret societies. They are held together by a relationship or bond of "reciprocal dependence and reciprocal familiarity" that members of the audience do not share (Goffman, 1959, p. 88). Each team member is obliged to maintain the stability of the group. The impression of reality is maintained by building in-group loyalty,

concealing in-team conflicts from the audience, and investing time in practicing a performance to ensure that the audience only sees the final product of a process. These strategies help protect members' social identities.

Members receive protection from their team and the audience in return for demonstrating dramaturgical loyalty, circumspection, and discipline. Their team will keep an individual's secrets hidden. Minor mistakes in a performance will be tactfully overlooked by the audience (Goffman, 1959). This particularly applies to beginners who are "more subject than otherwise to embarrassing mistakes" (Goffman, 1959, p. 225). Goffman noted that protection is offered by the audience out of empathy for the performers or a desire to avoid creating a scene.

Teams are usually managed by a director, someone who "is given the right to direct and control the progress of the dramatic action" (Goffman, 1959, p. 101). Their purpose is to allocate roles to performers and discipline team members whose performance is deemed "unsuitable" (Goffman, 1959, p. 102). Directors are held responsible by the audience for the success or failure of a performance.

Regions of the stage

Teams and individuals perform different versions of reality depending on the region of the stage and the context they find themselves in. A region is "any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception" (Goffman, 1959, p. 109). Goffman identified three regions where performances or social interactions may take place. The front stage is a formal public space where performers and performances are open to the scrutiny of audiences and other teams. This area contains the props required to authenticate a successful performance. The backstage is a region where only the team and sometimes other teams are permitted. Here team members relax, step out of character, plan, and

prepare for their next performance. Goffman also referred to another area of the back region where performers are alone, out-of-character, a place where their performances are unscripted. Mistakes can be made in the backstage region without fear of repercussions from the audience. The outside region is a space beyond the control of the performers or audience. This space is occupied by outsiders or “individuals who are on the outside of the establishment” (Goffman, 1959, p. 135). Rarely do outsiders see a performance.

Stage front or setting

In addition to the regions, Goffman also highlighted the role of the setting or context of the performance of reality. Goffman (1959) referred to this as the stage front. A performer can only assume a character and a role if the stage front contains the correct sign equipment. The presence of this equipment helps the audience assess the authenticity of an individual’s character mask and performance. The more authentic the setting, the more likely the audience will forgive deviations in an individual or team performance.

The audience is part of the performance

An audience is an individual or group of individuals who enter a stage front to participate in a social interaction or performance. Other performers within a team and observers may constitute an audience. Without an audience, a performance cannot take place. The role of the audience is to scrutinise the authenticity of the impression of reality and to punish unmeant gestures and out-of-character behaviours. Goffman noted that performers will carefully select their audience. Performers with many secrets to hide will segment their audiences.

The self as performer is socially constructed

For Goffman, the creation and maintenance of reality is reliant on visual and sensory perception (Friedman, 2015). This is “a form of contact and communion” (Goffman, 1959, p. 74). Mutual perception between the performer and others is required before a performance can take place (Balaita, 2016). Goffman did not discuss the anatomy and physiology of perception. Instead, he focused on the nature of embodied expression and the body techniques performers use to control information about themselves and manage the impression of reality.

Performers invest great effort in controlling their behaviour, appearance, and body. Performers take on a variety of roles and masks reflecting their social identities. For a performance or social interaction to be successful, the performer is required to hide their human self beneath a character mask.

The socialised self consists of the masks put on by a performer when they enter a particular stage front and assume a role. Masks and roles are socially constructed. They are based on stereotypes of the behavioural norms expected in that setting. Roles are often institutionalised and become “collective representations” (Goffman, 1959, p. 37). When an audience enters a stage front, they come with an expectation of the script, roles, and outcomes. A successful performance requires the audience to believe in the performer and the impression of reality they are attempting to convey. Goffman (1959, p. 210) was careful to note that experienced performers are expected to exercise “dramaturgical discipline” and deliver a technically competent and emotionally convincing performance. Beginners are expected to make mistakes. Unmeant gestures and other deviations from the script are tactfully overlooked by other performers and their audience.

An individual performer may wear many masks and perform many roles. These masks usually require little variation. Through “anticipatory socialization”, a performer only needs to be familiar with part of a role in order to perform it successfully (Goffman, 1959, p. 79). For Goffman, masks represented “the role we are striving to live up to ... our truer self, the self we would like to be” (Goffman, 1959, p. 30).

Personal front and the dramatic realisation of roles

Performers aim to put on their best ‘personal front’ with the goal of convincing their audience of the trustworthiness and authenticity of their performance. Successful dramatic realisation and buy-in from the audience requires the performer to believe in the role they are playing and create a believable impression of reality (Goffman, 1959). A performer who is cynical or questioning about their role is less likely to be successful in convincing their audience that they are who they say they are.

The dramatic realisation of an idealised role requires the correct personal front. A personal front consists of the “expressive equipment ... intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his [sic] performance” (Goffman, 1959, p. 32). Expressive equipment may include costumes, gender, age, ethnicity, facial expressions, and comportment. These tell the audience and other performers about the social status and role that a performer is likely to play in a particular setting.

The body is a key part of a performer’s expressive equipment. Performers are continually using strategies to manage how the body is presented to others (Dolezal, 2017). The body, its manner, and appearance are significant preoccupations for performers in aesthetic roles.

Expressive control and successful dramatic realisation

A successful performance of a role and reality requires the performer to remain in character and maintain expressive control. Controlling one's appearance and comportment are central to this process. An out-of-character movement or mannerism is referred to as an "unmeant gesture" (Goffman, 1959, p. 60). These must be avoided in order to prevent damaging the fragile impression of reality created during a performance. Unmeant gestures and other "faux pas" lead to embarrassment and the potential stigmatisation of the performer (Goffman, 1959, p. 134).

3.3.5 Performances of reality reinforce moral values

Goffman (1959, p. 243) referred to individual performers as "merchants of morality". Performers may appear concerned about upholding organisational values but in truth they are more interested in keeping up their impression of moral compliance in front of others. Moral standards may become so internalised that performers may feel compelled to adhere to them in private when no others are present (Goffman, 1959). All aspects of appearance and manner are subject to evaluation and moral judgements (Goffman, 1963a, 1963b). Comportment acquires a moral quality depending on the mover and the setting (Doucet, 2006). Individuals learn to move in ways that are acceptable and in line with social norms. Movement outside of the expected social norms opens the performer up to moral scrutiny and stigmatisation.

Moral values and morality are central to Goffman's social theory. Morality, status, and stigma are closely interlinked. Moral values are those rules and social norms which govern dress, etiquette, and other behaviours within a particular setting or organisation. All social interactions have a "distinctive moral character" (Goffman, 1959, p. 24). Goffman (1959, p. 234) noted that

the cultural values of an establishment will determine in detail how the participants are to feel about many matters and at the same time establish a framework of appearances that must be maintained, whether or not there is feeling behind the appearances.

When a performer enters a social interaction, they have a “moral right” to expect that these standards will be adhered to and they will be treated in a manner fitting their position or social status (Goffman, 1959, p. 24).

3.3.6 The expressive body and the body idiom

Goffman’s social theory focuses on making visible the everyday, taken-for-granted expressions given off by the body (Dolezal, 2017). Goffman’s performers experience others and the world through their bodies (Balaita, 2016). This body is an expressive body that constantly communicates with the world around it. According to Goffman, embodiment “is fluid, diverse, visible and invisible, and contingent on social contexts” (as cited in Doucet, 2006, p. 699). Dolezal (2017, p. 239) noted that individuals are “continuously – and constitutionally – engaged in implicit and explicit strategies to manage how the body is presented to others.”

Goffman identified two categories of expression generated through “bodily co-presence” (Balaita, 2016). These are the expressions the performer “gives” and those that are “given off” (Goffman, 1959, p. 14). The first category includes verbal communications that the performer consciously uses during social interactions. The second category are unintentional and non-verbal bodily expressions particular to the performer. The performer uses a variety of strategies to control the appearance and comportment of the body during interactions.

Non-verbal communication is particularly important during performances of social reality. Goffman (1963a, p. 35) observed that “although an individual can stop talking,

he [sic] cannot stop communicating through body idiom; he must say either the right thing or the wrong thing. He cannot say nothing.” The body idiom is a shared vocabulary of conventionalised and stereotyped non-verbal signs that are recognised and interpreted at an unconscious pre-reflective level by the performer and others (Dolezal, 2017). The shared nature of the body idiom “tends to evoke the same meaning for the actor as for the witness, and tends to be employed by the actor because of its meaning for the witness” (Goffman, 1963a, pp. 34-35).

These non-verbal signs include physical appearance and “personal acts: dress, bearing, movement and position, sound level, physical gestures such as waving or saluting, racial decorations, and broad emotional expression” (Goffman, 1963a, p. 33). These are institutionalised and specific to the cultural and social setting in which the face-to-face interaction takes place. For Goffman, the visibility of the body in social interactions necessitates attention to self-presentation (Dolezal, 2017).

Goffman’s observations on reciprocity between performers and the expressive body directly parallel Merleau-Ponty’s body-subject. Both are in a continual two-way dialogue between themselves, others, and the social world. For Goffman and Merleau-Ponty, human actors are firmly embedded in this cultural world. They exist and derive their identities from the existence of others.

3.3.7 Stigma and stigmatised performers

Goffman (1963b) argued that stigma is a social construction rather than an individual issue. He considered stigma to be an important factor affecting social interactions in everyday life. Goffman described in detail the impact of norms and social expectations on individuals and groups, and the lengths they go to conceal their stigmatised status.

Goffman (1963b, p. 11) defined stigma as an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” and “an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated” (p. 13). A discrediting attribute is one that marks an individual as failing to conform with the expected beliefs, appearances, and behaviours of a particular stage front or setting. Stigma exists between the performer’s attribute and the audience’s identification of that attribute as abnormal. Goffman (1963b, p. 12) identifies three categories of stigmatisation: “abominations of the body” (for example, physical deformities, disabilities, or illness); “blemishes of individual character” (for example, dishonesty, weak will, or homosexuality); and “tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion” (for example, ethnicity, or social class). To the latter category, we can add gender and age (Cecil et al., 2022; Chaudoir et al., 2013). Stigma is not always a permanent status. An attribute may be stigmatising in one social context and in another be perfectly normal. The setting and other performers determine which attributes are stigmatised and which are not.

Stigma involves some degree of “mortification” or loss of self-esteem and social identity (Goffman, 1973). Shame is a significant component of stigma and is reported throughout Goffman’s writings. For Goffman (1963b, p. 15), “shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual’s perception of one of his [sic] own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself as not possessing.”

Goffman distinguished between performers who are discredited (their stigma is visible and difficult to hide) and those who are discreditable (their stigma can be concealed). Gender is a discredited attribute (Chaudoir et al., 2013). Individuals will use a variety of strategies to minimise the impact of stigma on their social interactions. These include: keeping a social distance from others who may discriminate against them or reveal their secret; wearing “stigma symbols” to keep others away; or carefully segregating their

audiences (Goffman, 1963b, p. 51). Goffman mentioned several strategies that a performer may use to reduce body or age-related stigma. These include wearing “articles of dress worn to conceal part of his [sic] deformity” (Goffman, 1963b, p. 100) and avoiding certain corrective accessories such as bifocal glasses and hearing aids. Stigmatised individuals may also attempt to pass or cover the undesirable attribute.

Goffman (1963b) noted that almost everyone experiences stigma during their lifetime but also adds that only Caucasian American middle-class males can be considered unstigmatised and therefore normal.

Social deviants and disaffiliates

Goffman (1963b) devoted a whole chapter to social deviance. Goffman (1963b) categorised some stigmatised individuals as social deviants and disaffiliates. A social deviant is an individual who does not share the same norms as the wider group. Goffman’s examples include prostitutes, gamblers, jazz musicians, bohemians, beach dwellers, and homosexuals. The social norms they breach include family, age, and stereotyped sex roles. Disaffiliates are those who openly choose not to comply with their expected place in society. This category includes “hobbyists who become so devoted to their avocation that only a husk remains for civil attachments, as in the case of some ardent stamp collectors, club tennis players, and sports car buffs” (Goffman, 1963b, pp. 152-153).

When stigmatised individuals come together in a group with others who share their stigma, they become a “deviant community” (Goffman, 1963b, p. 151). These communities represent a safe place or “haven of self-defense” where the shared stigma is accepted and normalised (Goffman, 1963b, p. 153). Goffman noted that involvement

in a deviant community often results in a better quality of life than might otherwise have been expected.

3.3.8 Goffman and de Beauvoir

This project focuses on the lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who dance ballet for recreation. Goffman's framing of the social world and identity as theatrical performances is particularly relevant to this project. His writings on stigmatised individuals and the role of groups in normalising stigma significantly align with de Beauvoir's phenomenological analysis of woman and old age.

3.4 de Beauvoir's existential phenomenology of woman and old age

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) is considered one of the most significant and controversial philosophers of the 20th century. Her two most notable works, *The Second Sex* (1949/1993) and *Old Age* (1970/1972), were written at times of social turmoil and change for women. de Beauvoir explored the lived experiences of feminine and aged being in western society. Why de Beauvoir wrote these works has been the subject of much debate. It is generally accepted that de Beauvoir was motivated by her own experiences of being 'othered' as a woman and as a maturing person (Kirkpatrick, 2019; Woodward, 1993). By exposing the constraints society imposes on women and the aged, de Beauvoir challenged the oppressed to examine their lives and seek their own freedom.

At the time *The Second Sex* was published, evidence from the natural sciences was used to support the popular belief that women are weaker and inferior to men (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993). de Beauvoir remains "extremely relevant today" (Vintges, 1999, p. 133). Despite the passage of time and the second wave of the feminist movement, the social

mechanisms through which otherness and oppression are constructed and reproduced remain entrenched in western society. When the situations of women and maturing adults are viewed through a Beauvoirian lens, little appears to have changed. de Beauvoir's writing provides a means of examining the ideological and social constraints that shape the lived experience of being a maturing woman. As such, de Beauvoir's writings provide valuable insights into the subjectivity of maturing women who participate in adult recreational ballet in New Zealand.

Like Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir was an existentialist philosopher. As such, they shared a similar understanding of the "body as a basis for being" (Cataldi, 2001, p. 85). de Beauvoir extended this understanding of embodied subjectivity in her critical examination of the historical origins and lived experience of woman (Bergoffen & Burke, 2023). de Beauvoir sought to provide a phenomenological glimpse into the constitution of feminine being and the embodied lived reality of women in western society. In her existential analysis, de Beauvoir asked three key questions: What is woman? Why are women oppressed and positioned as inferior to men? And how can women achieve freedom?

3.4.1 What is the lived experience of being a woman?

de Beauvoir did not debate that the human species is divided into male and female beings. Instead, she asserted that physiological differences between the sexes are insignificant and not a justification for the subordination and positioning of woman as inferior to men (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993).

Woman is a social construction

de Beauvoir (1949/1993, p. xxxvi) observed that “not every female human being is necessarily a woman.” A child “is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 281). This social category was created by the patriarchy and is reproduced through social institutions and doctrine which position women as inferior and other. Man has subjectivity and exists for himself. Woman, however, is an “eternal child”, a lesser being than man (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 629). Woman exists for the pleasure of men, the reproduction of the species, and to service others. As such she “is her body; but her body is something other than herself” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 30). Woman is denied subjectivity and relegated to an inferior status in western society.

Femininity is a social construction

de Beauvoir (1949/1993) argued that the being and role of woman is reinforced by each generation through socialisation and the embodiment of “that vague and basic essence, femininity” (p. 213). At the heart of femininity is Plato’s eternal feminine. This is a set of behaviours and character traits assigned to women by men.

de Beauvoir (1949/1993, p. 267) argued that the eternal feminine and femininity are constructed through stereotypes that are treated as “indisputable ... absolute truth”. These myths are built around archetypes of woman as good, evil, and death. de Beauvoir (1949/1993) found that these oppositions are inconsistent and are used to portray women as difficult to understand and different to men. These contradictions within femininity allow men to objectify women and to treat physical, emotional, and social suffering as “intended by nature” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 270).

A child becomes a woman by complying with the dominant ideologies and beliefs governing femininity, sexuality, and social roles (Crowley & Himmelweit, 1994; de Beauvoir, 1949/1993; Heinämaa, 1997). The mother, family, and wider society all play a part in ensuring that female children embody the ideals of womanhood. During this socialisation process, woman “is taught that to please she must try to please, she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 295).

Passivity is at the heart of the myth of the eternal feminine and womanhood. From childhood, a woman learns that “to be feminine is to show oneself as weak, futile, passive, and docile ... any self-assertion will take away from her femininity and her seductiveness” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 353). When women are unable to live up to this unrealistic and unobtainable construction of feminine being, “we are told not that Femininity is a false entity; but that the women concerned are not feminine” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 267). By embodying the feminine ideal, de Beauvoir believed that woman allows herself to become man’s other and an object.

Woman is other and trapped in immanence

de Beauvoir (1949/1993) argued that men have positioned themselves as the dominant group in human society. As the creators of social, economic, and political institutions, they engineer the inequalities that keep women within the home “in a state of dependence” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 147). Consequently, men view women as lower forms of being that are “inessential” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 208) and “the other” (p. xi). As the holders of power, men are able to seek “freedom and transcendence” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 262). Women, in their role as carers for

others, are denied subjectivity and freedom. As passive objects women are “trapped in the immanence of being” (Scholz, 2008, p. 6).

At the heart of otherness is a lack of reciprocity and failure to acknowledge that women are subjects and capable of achieving freedom (Anderson, 2014, 2019). This lack of reciprocity and recognition of women’s humanity is fundamental to their oppression.

Woman knows that youth and beauty are valued

For de Beauvoir, femininity is “the metamorphosis of woman into idol” and “the ideal erotic object” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 167). Femininity privileges youth, health, and beauty. This cultural ideal is expressed through the preoccupation with the beautiful body and notions of feminine beauty. Ageing and death are the antitheses of femininity. To remain valuable to the patriarchy, the illusion of youth must be maintained by the artifices of clothing and makeup. These artifices serve to disguise woman’s natural reproductive functions which men fear as they are a reminder of ageing and death (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993).

Woman experiences her body as shameful and a burden

For de Beauvoir, the human body “is not a thing ... it is a situation ... it is the instrument of our grasp upon the world, a limiting factor for our projects” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 35). Woman is her body and this determines her opportunities and how she is treated by the world (Knowles, 2019). As children, men and women learn about the gender role expectations of their societies. In childhood, a woman learns to feel ashamed of her body and its functions. In adolescence her secondary sexual characteristics make her the object of the male gaze and she is relegated to a lower social status (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993). These feelings of shame and difference are reinforced by the attitudes of

her family and others in society. Woman realises that she is no longer an individual, and “she becomes for others a thing” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 324).

Women’s ways of knowing have no value

Woman has an “inferiority complex” rooted in her socialisation and lack of education (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 351). She is an ignorant “parasite” who possesses no real knowledge of the things she speaks about (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 116). Woman’s ways of knowing all revolve around her role as mother and carer for others. Her procedural knowledge only has value in the domestic sphere where “every day the kitchen teaches her patience and passivity” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 629). Woman’s embodied knowing and felt bodily knowledge revolve around her awareness of the cycles of pregnancy and menstruation (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993). These things have no value to the patriarchy. In the world of men “the ideal woman is perfectly stupid and submissive” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 214). An educated thinking woman is contrary to the patriarchal ideals of femininity. Facing inwards into the home and her own body, “immanence is her lot” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 635).

Woman’s oppression is a social and historical phenomenon

de Beauvoir’s analysis of feminine being highlights the importance of historical social structures and hierarchies in the oppression of women. Male-dominated scientific, political, and religious institutions have used biological difference as evidence of woman’s inferiority and a justification for the oppression of women at all levels of western society.

de Beauvoir (1949/1993) argued that woman is aware that her freedoms and options in society are limited. Woman knows that she is oppressed but is unable to escape patriarchal subjugation due to the necessity to reproduce the human species. Her youth

and reproductive capabilities are valued above any other qualities she may bring to humanity. As woman moves into middle age, her youth, fertility, and value to the patriarchy decline. Woman's experiences of oppression and marginalisation only increase as she matures into middle age and later adulthood.

Middle age as transcendence and immanence

de Beauvoir (1949/1993) claimed that old age begins at menopause. In the patriarchy, where youth and fecundity are valued, she "becomes a different being, unsexed but complete: an old woman" (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 614). Women lose their femininity, desirability and become "withered, faded, as might be said of a plant" (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 169).

de Beauvoir (1949/1993) claimed that menopause and middle age are the beginnings of an identity crisis in western society. Some women resort to "hair-dye, skin treatments, [and] plastic surgery" (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 606) to convince those around her "that they are not subject to 'the universal law' of ageing" (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 328). For others, menopause brings a renewed sense of wellbeing and energy. These women seek subjectivity and transcendence by taking up new interests and re-learning skills from childhood (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993).

de Beauvoir (1949/1993) is critical of woman's attempts to free herself from oppression. By the time a woman finds freedom it is already too late as there are no alternative roles for her in patriarchal society. She has no goals to strive for, no dreams to achieve, and no need for new knowledge. Woman realises that there is "nothing more for her to do than merely survive her better days; her body will promise nothing; the dreams, the longings she has not made good, will remain forever unfulfilled" (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, pp. 606-607). Woman becomes trapped in immanence again.

This was no surprise to de Beauvoir (1949/1993). Women exist in a “coercive social world” governed by men (Knowles, 2019, p. 256). Lack of power and fear of change drive women to choose complicity over freedom. By choosing to relinquish responsibility, de Beauvoir’s woman holds men responsible for her situation. In doing so woman becomes complicit in her own immanence and exists “in a state of impotent rage” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 638). Human beings cannot thrive in immanence. Women must be allowed to transcend towards the future (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993).

3.4.2 What is the lived experience of old age?

In 1970 de Beauvoir published *La Vieillesse* (*The Coming of Age* or *Old Age* in English translation). This book is the first analysis of the lived experiences of maturing adults in western society from a social, economic, and psychological perspective. In this text de Beauvoir exposed the ageism inherent in the construction of ageing being and the injustice this creates for maturing individuals. de Beauvoir (1970/1972, p. 603) called for a change of social attitudes to ensure that older adults do not spend their “last years alone and empty-handed” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 603).

de Beauvoir (1970/1972, p. 243) declared that “the condition of old people today is scandalous ... as a general rule society shuts its eyes to all abuses, scandals and tragedies, so long as these do not upset its balance.” Society positions and treats its maturing citizens as less than human. The aged person is no longer a complete person. The only way to redress the maltreatment and suffering of maturing adults is to rebuild society and our way of seeing ageing (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972).

de Beauvoir’s depictions of ageing are negative and bleak (Woodward, 1993). The vivid descriptions are deliberately confronting and are designed to highlight the unethical

treatment of maturing adults. Woodward (1993, p. 24) noted, however, that the model of ageing de Beauvoir advises adults to accept is one of “a person powerless and frail, inarticulate and dispossessed.” Cultural scripts and role models for positive ageing are absent from de Beauvoir’s accounts.

Despite Woodward’s observations, de Beauvoir (1970/1972) proposed possible alternative futures for maturing adults. These possibilities require society to: confront its own inauthentic attitudes towards ageing; restore reciprocal relationships between older and younger generations; create new cultural narratives of ageing as progress rather than decline (Rubenstein, 2001); and treat adults as subjects rather than objects.

Ageing is a natural process

de Beauvoir (1970/1972) argued that ‘old’, like woman, is a becoming and is socially constructed. She asserted that “society looks upon old age as a kind of shameful secret that is unseemly to mention” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 7). Maturing is “in complete conflict with the manly or womanly ideal cherished by the young and fully-grown” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 46). In western culture, ageing and death are forbidden topics. Society, particularly middle-aged patriarchy, denies that ageing is a natural phase of the human development schema. de Beauvoir (1970/1972, p. 42) stressed that ageing is “an unavoidable and irreversible phenomenon” and no one can escape it. By failing to accept ageing as part of the human experience, society denies maturing adults the possibility of a future. The only trajectory open to them is one of ill health, poverty, social isolation, and loneliness. This, de Beauvoir (1970/1972) argued, is bad faith and inauthentic being.

Old age is socially constructed through the gaze of others

Like Goffman’s performers, the men and women in de Beauvoir’s writings are firmly situated within a social world. Individuals perform particular roles and are pressured by

their communities to conform to established norms of behaviour. Failure to accept a role opens the subject to “scandal or quite simply (of) ridicule” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 357).

This applies particularly to maturing adults. For de Beauvoir, the categories of ‘old’ and ‘old age’ are socially constructed. These categories are “ontologically unrealizable” in that both are identified and internalised through the gaze of others (Gilleard, 2022, p. 287). The ambiguous nature of subjectivity and epistemological opacity means an individual does not possess full self-knowledge (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972). Instead, society tells the individual that they have entered old age and must now accept that status or risk an identity crisis (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972).

The marginalisation of maturing adults is immoral

de Beauvoir’s believed that “society cares about the individual only in so far as he [sic] is profitable” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 604). Women lose their economic value at menopause, while men do so at retirement. At this time, a person “has a most distressing feeling of being reduced to nothing” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 542).

This marginalisation of maturing adults is enabled by a lack of reciprocity and empathy. As a result, the younger generations do not see themselves reflected in the adults around them. de Beauvoir (1970/1972) argued that this absence of empathy and lack of concern allows the middle-aged to mistreat and exploit their elders. Positioning maturing adults as objects contributes to their biological, economic, and social decline. Consequently, they become “physically fragile; socially they are outcasts; and this has serious effects upon their mental health, either directly or by means of the physical deterioration” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 548). Depression is common and is

experienced as “loss of ego, loss of value, boredom, blocked future, powerlessness” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 551).

Loneliness is central to de Beauvoir’s accounts of the lived experience of being a maturing adult in western society. Separated from workplaces and families, aged individuals find themselves cut off from their old social networks. As with women, social isolation and lack of economic power make it difficult to form a collective and assert their rights. This further contributes to their invisibility and the social isolation experienced by maturing adults (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972).

Women have a different social experience of ageing

Like de Beauvoir’s woman, the maturing adult is their body and this body is their situation. They cannot escape it. Ageing for women and men is characterised by declines in physical health and accompanied by feelings of frustration, anxiety, boredom, and “loneliness in the midst of a world that has nothing but indifference for them” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 516).

As passive objects and inessential others, women have a different experience of maturing to men. According to de Beauvoir (1949/1993, 1970/1972), middle age and later adulthood are traumatic times for women. Already man’s inessential other, gendered ageism further marginalises and renders women powerless (Woodward, 1993). In midlife and beyond there are few “culturally embedded” and “emotional scripts” to follow (Rubenstein, 2001, p. 3). This creates a “double consciousness through which the self is experienced negatively” (Pickard, 2022, p. 2). As such, mental health and wellbeing issues are frequent experiences for maturing women (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972).

Women, bored and lonely, fill their lives with activities designed to “kill time” and “mask their horrible idleness” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 622). These distractions are time wasting and not future-focused. Consequently, the individual “falls back into vain immanence” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 623).

To prevent this de Beauvoir (1949/1993) called on maturing adults to invest their time in a worthwhile project. This is one which “expresses the pure joy of living” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 623); leads the individual “towards ever wider horizons”; and is “integrated with the movement of human transcendence” (p. 624).

de Beauvoir’s position on the benefits of projects for adults in *Old Age* (1970/1972) contrasts sharply with her positioning of women’s leisure in *The Second Sex* (1949/1993). When writing in the 1940s, de Beauvoir viewed women’s recreational activities as having little value in the quest for human enlightenment. Creative leisure, such as painting, music, reading, and needlework, feature in the list of pursuits used “to entertain idle women in search of escape” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, pp. 624-625). de Beauvoir’s change of perspective may reflect the social changes brought about by the feminist movement in the 1960s or the fact that she was in her 60s when *Old Age* was published.

Habits are the basis of identity in old age

Maturing individuals often choose to dwell in the memories of their younger days. These memories and habits provide a means of dealing with the “psychomotor shortcomings” that accompany an ageing body and changing health status (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 316). As adults mature, habits become more important. de Beauvoir defined habits as routines, styles of comportment, and communication. These habits provide maturing adults with “a kind of ontological security. Because of habit he [sic] knows who he is”

(de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 521). Habits represent the accumulation of past activities and behaviours brought into the present. They can be negative or future focused. Negative habits are time wasting and meaningless (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972). Future-focused habits are those that are part of the richness of an individual's everyday life. These are meaningful as they have "the power of revealing the whole world to us" (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 521).

Habits formed during an individual's childhood are significant as they leave an imprint that is reflected in the behaviours and beliefs expressed during adulthood (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972). Childhood "is the time when the individual makes himself [sic] into what he [sic] will basically remain forever; it is then that he projects himself [sic] into those things that are to be done" (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 448). As maturing adults, we "cannot arbitrarily invent projects for ourselves: they have been written in our past" (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 448).

A meaningful later life begins in middle age

de Beauvoir noted that midlife is a pivotal time in the human lifespan. Health and living standards in later adulthood "depend upon those of his [sic] middle life" (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 560). The middle years, like youth, are a time of transcendence that is "experienced as a continual rise" in happiness, knowledge, wealth, and living standards (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 546).

de Beauvoir urged people to think ahead about how they wish to live in later years. Preparing for this period is more than simply acquiring material wealth, it is about quality of life. de Beauvoir (1970/1972, p. 601) cautioned that:

People are often advised to 'prepare' for old age. But if this merely applies to setting aside money, choosing the place for retirement and

laying on hobbies, we shall not be much the better for it when the day comes.

A meaningful later adulthood cannot “be an absurd parody of our former life” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 601). The goal is to ensure that individuals actively cultivate pursuits, and private and community relationships that “give our existence a meaning” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 601). The choices made in earlier years determine the experience of later adulthood (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972). Continuing to engage in “intellectual and emotional interests” may contribute to improved wellbeing outcomes in later years (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 575).

Finding liberation and freedom through creativity and learning

For some individuals, ageing is a time of liberation. Indifferent “to public opinion ... they no longer have to trouble about pleasing ... no longer have to practice hypocrisy ... now they are really themselves” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 543). The possibilities of “enrichment and liberation” are available to those “who refuse to be defined as ‘a reduced, diminished individual struggling to remain a human being’” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 540-541). A maturing person who rejects society’s opinions and oppression becomes a whole person (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972). de Beauvoir (1970/1972) observes, however, that most people are afraid to follow their own path.

de Beauvoir saw creativity and learning as sources of transcendence and pathways to freedom. Exploring new interests prevents “complete inertia”, a state which “discourages both curiosity and enthusiasm” and causes individuals to “no longer see any good cause for action” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 504). Maturing adults who have hobbies and interests which grow knowledge and skills have “the greatest good fortune,

even greater than health” as they remain “busy and useful” and avoid “boredom and decay” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 548).

Learning new skills and re-learning old skills are valuable sources of self-development and transcendence. “Active apprenticeship” is de Beauvoir’s name for engaging with skills originally acquired in childhood and midlife (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 424). This idea of apprenticeship applies to “some arts and callings ... so difficult that a whole lifetime is needed to master them” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 424). Learning and re-learning skills is not an easy process but it can be done and is worthwhile if it brings meaning to life (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972).

3.5 Chapter summary

This study investigates the lived experience of women who dance ballet for leisure. Merleau-Ponty’s perceptual phenomenology offers an account of embodied being and the inseparable relationship between the body-subject and the world. Goffman’s dramaturgical theory provides a framework for understanding the importance of social relationships in the formation and maintenance of individual and group identities. de Beauvoir’s existential phenomenology of woman and ageing offers a means of understanding the influence of society on the identity and lived experiences of maturing women within western society. Together these philosophical perspectives help uncover and interpret the meanings of recreational ballet in the lives of maturing New Zealand women.

In Chapter Four, the research design and methods are outlined. This chapter explores the ethical considerations, participant recruitment, and the phenomenological approach underpinning the collection, analysis and interpretation of the interview data.

Chapter 4 Research design and methods

4.1 Introduction

The study investigates the following question and sub-questions:

What are the lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes?

- How does recreational ballet participation contribute to health, wellbeing, and positive ageing for New Zealand women?
- What social and situational factors contribute to the creation of positive and meaningful pedagogical experiences for maturing women who participate in recreational dance?

Chapter One outlined the background and rationale for this project. Chapter Two summarised what is known about adult recreational ballet dancers in the literature and highlights the attitudes to maturing professional bodies within the dance world. Significant gaps were revealed in teachers' knowledge about: the learning needs and motivations of adults in their classes; health and safety practices when working with maturing bodies; and appropriate pedagogies for teaching adults. Chapter Three detailed a methodology blending perceptual phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, 1964/1968) and existential phenomenology (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, 1970/1972), with Goffman's dramaturgical framework (Goffman, 1959, 1963b) to investigate six women's lived experiences of recreational ballet classes and the meanings they attribute to the social and physical practices of dance. Together, they examine how individuals collaborate to create social worlds and navigate stereotypes that hinder their pursuit of transcendence and freedom. This chapter outlines the

project research design with discussion of the ethical considerations, including participant recruitment, and the theoretical and practical aspects of data collection and analysis.

4.2 Ethical considerations

At the heart of this project was an intention to make visible those who are invisible, and to hear those who are unheard. Inherent in lived experiences of invisibility are imbalances in power relations, inequality, and marginalisation (Krekula et al., 2018). As such, the participants and their stories were positioned at the centre of this project. All aspects of the research process were designed to uphold and respect the participants' mana (a Māori language term meaning personal integrity and dignity) and tino rangatiratanga (Māori for personal sovereignty and their right to have their voices heard).

Over the duration of this project, Auckland University of Technology was undergoing a process of embedding te Tiriti o Waitangi or the Treaty of Waitangi and tikanga Māori or customary practices into all aspects of its institutional culture and everyday activities (Auckland University of Technology, 2023). As such, the ethics of manaakitanga (caring for others) and whanaungatanga (honouring relationships) underpinned all decision making and activities undertaken in this project.

The embedding of ethical practices from the start of this project helped ensure that this ethos of care was at the forefront of research and supervision activities. The principles outlined by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK) were used to guide the research design (Auckland University of Technology, n.d.). The *DANZ Code of Professional Practice for Teachers of Dance* (DANZ, 2014) was also taken into consideration when contacting dance schools, and recruiting and interviewing

participants. This project, titled “The lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes”, was approved by AUTECH on December 1, 2020 (Ethics application number 20/388, see Appendix A). Ethics approval included the participant information sheet (Appendix B), consent form (Appendix C), and recruitment advertisement (Appendix D).

The arrival of COVID-19 in New Zealand raised both ethical and procedural issues. The data collection phase of this project took place while New Zealand was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic (New Zealand Government, 2021). Auckland University of Technology suspended all in-person research activities until New Zealand moved to alert level 2 (Auckland University of Technology, 2020). This mandate was followed to ensure the health and wellbeing of the researcher and the participants.

The use of internet video calling to conduct interviews was explored. The literature indicates that similar levels of rapport and depth of personal disclosure can be obtained using Zoom (Archibald et al., 2019), Skype (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Hanna, 2012; Jenner & Myers, 2019; Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Seitz, 2015), and other videoconferencing software (Glassmeyer & Dibbs, 2012; Irani, 2018; Weller, 2017). However, the literature also speaks to challenges which potentially impact the interview experience and the quality of data. Using internet-based software may be difficult for participants who have low digital literacy skills or lack access to computers (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Using online interviewing may also result in: the over-disclosure of sensitive information by participants; loss of rapport through technical difficulties; and challenges seeing non-facial body language and observing how participants interact with their environments (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). As this project focused on embodied being, and the wellbeing of participants was of primary concern, it was decided to delay data collection until

Auckland and most of the North Island of New Zealand had moved back to alert level one when in-person gatherings without face masks were permitted (New Zealand Government, n.d.).

4.2.1 Participant recruitment and interviewing

Recruitment advertisements were sent to selected dance schools in the North Island that teach adult recreational ballet classes. Potential participants were invited to make contact by email and were sent a participant information sheet. If still interested, potential participants were invited to contact the researcher and ask questions. A \$50 voucher was offered as koha or a gift for the participants' time.

4.2.2 Participant inclusion criteria

- Self-identify as female.
- Aged 35 years old and over.
- Have participated continuously in ballet classes for one year or more.
- Studying ballet in an urban or rural dance school in the community or private sector in the North Island of New Zealand.
- Conversational English speaker.

4.2.3 Rationale for the inclusion criteria

Self-identify as female

This study focused on the experiences of recreational dancers who self-identified as female.

Aged 35 years old and over

The recreational and pre-professional ballet literature tends to focus on the experiences of children and teenagers, elite young adults, or adults aged 65 and over who have neurological conditions. This study originally intended to focus on women aged 45 and

over. While testing the interview questions it became apparent that women begin to experience physical and social changes in their 30s which differentiate them from young adult dancers. These experiences were considered to be significant enough to extend the age range from 35 years of age onwards.

The experiences of women aged over 35 are largely absent from the ballet literature. The health science literature indicates that midlife is a pivotal point for health trajectories in later life (Lachman et al., 2014). For women, physical activity begins to markedly decline after 45 (McArthur et al., 2014). Higher levels of physical activity in middle age are associated with “exceptional health status” for women who survive beyond 70 years old (Sun et al., 2010, p. 194).

Participated continuously in ballet classes for one year or more

Ballet is a technically demanding genre. It takes time to acquire the physical coordination and cognitive skills needed to perform ballet movements (Alterowitz, 2014). One year is enough time for an adult to have experienced the process of acquiring new movement skills and to have become immersed in the language and culture of ballet. After a year of continuous dance practice, participants may be able to better reflect on their personal journeys and experiences of the phenomenon.

Studying ballet in the North Island of New Zealand

An internet search for providers of adult recreational ballet education indicated that most were situated in the North Island. It was anticipated that recruiting from schools in urban and rural contexts would attract participants from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. This was expected to be reflected in their experiences of the

phenomenon. No studies of adult recreational ballet dancers have compared the lived experiences of urban and rural participants.

Conversational English speaker

The participants and I needed to be able to hold a conversation in which complex ideas and imagery were verbalised. English is my everyday spoken language.

4.2.4 The participants

Fourteen potential participants expressed interest in being interviewed. Twelve women made the decision to continue to the interview stage. Six later withdrew for personal reasons and concerns around COVID-19. Six participants were interviewed between May and early August 2021. Participants' names and ages were the only demographic data collected. At the time of interviewing the participants were aged between 30 and 80 years old.

Interviews with participants were arranged at a place and time of their choosing. They were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Participants were given a consent form to read and sign before the interview commenced. The women were invited to select their own pseudonyms to help maintain their anonymity. Participants were told that they did not have to answer questions if they felt uncomfortable and that they could stop the interview at any time. Each interview lasted between one and two-and-a-half hours. The conversations were recorded on a handheld recording device and the 'Live Transcribe' mobile phone app. Written notes were also made during the interviews.

4.3 Theoretical and practical considerations

4.3.1 Reflexivity and uncovering researcher presuppositions

Clark et al. (2021, p. 367) defined reflexivity as “the act of reflecting upon yourself and your experiences.” Within the context of research design this is the practice of acknowledging the researcher’s assumptions and bias about the phenomenon under investigation. Vagle (2014) pointed to three aspects of reflexivity that researchers should attend to. These are: “positional reflexivity” or being aware of one’s own beliefs; “textual reflexivity” or being aware of the choices made during writing; and “constitutive reflexivity” or how we describe our participants’ relationships to the phenomenon (Vagle, 2014, p. 69).

Laverty (2003) noted that in Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, reflection occurs at the beginning of the research journey. Through a process called epoché or reduction, the researcher aims to ‘bracket’ or put aside their assumptions about the world to prevent the description of a phenomenon being tainted by bias (van Manen, 2014). For Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002, p. XV), bracketing our own experiences is not possible and “the most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction.” We cannot separate ourselves from our experiences as “we are in the world” and “our reflections are carried out in the temporal flux on ... which we are trying to seize” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, p. XV). Our lived experiences are not static. Our reflections of a phenomenon and interpretations of meaning will always be within the sociocultural and historical context of the dynamic flow of “lived time” (van Manen, 1997, p. 104).

The researcher's experiences are an essential part of the interpretive process (Laverly, 2003). To reduce bias, researchers are encouraged to reflect on their knowledge of and assumptions about the phenomenon of interest. Before research began, I asked a colleague to interview me about my presuppositions and experiences of adult ballet. This process assisted me in seeing attitudes and beliefs that I was not aware of and enabled me to enter a "reflective attitude" (van Manen, 1997, p. 64). These experiences and those described in the literature have guided the design and implementation of this project.

4.3.2 Data collection

Neither Merleau-Ponty nor de Beauvoir prescribed a method of investigation for research based in existential phenomenology. As such, data collection and analysis for this project were guided by van Manen's six activities for phenomenological researchers (van Manen, 1997) and existential guided inquiry (van Manen, 1997, 2014). van Manen's guidance is supported by Engelsrud and Rosberg (2022), Quinney et al. (2016), and Vagle (2014).

Interviewing as "giving into gravity" (Engelsrud & Rosberg, 2022, p. 1835)

An interview, if seen through a Merleau-Pontian lens, could be conceived of as a two-way dialogue between the self and other within the interworld between flesh. In this context the researcher and the participant are engaged in a "mutual bodily resonance" (Engelsrud & Rosberg, 2022, p. 1834) and experience each other through "mutual incorporation" (Engelsrud & Rosberg, 2022, p. 1833). Implied in this is an intersubjective and interaffective experience in which ideas are communicated verbally and non-verbally through the body. To create a space of openness where the participant feels

safe to express themselves requires the interviewer to become grounded and to be present in time and space. By “giving into gravity”, the researcher invites the participant to do the same and to allow themselves to enter a space of contemplation and reflection (Engelsrud & Rosberg, 2022, p. 1835).

In this sense, phenomenology calls for the researcher and participant to allow their authentic selves to become visible to the other. Relaxing and “resting in one’s own body” (Engelsrud & Rosberg, 2022, p. 1834) in the company of others can be an unnerving experience for both parties.

In my everyday working life, the world I inhabit is a meeting place of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Here the rituals of encounter help to break down barriers and enable the creation of shared spaces for communication and learning. I transferred my awareness of the importance of these rituals into the interview context. Where permitted, I practiced manaakitanga or care by bringing food and sharing in the participant’s hospitality. This also served to lift tapu or spiritual restrictions caused by pre-interview anxiety. I used humour and stories to help break any tensions or embarrassment that arose during the interview. I laughed, sighed, and cried with participants. I observed the kawa or protocols of the participant’s home places and respected their mana or personal integrity and dignity throughout the research process. As manuhiri or a visitor in their lives, I endeavoured to leave the participants as I found them, whole people valued for their mātauranga or knowledge, wisdom, and experience.

Reflection in data collection and analysis process

McNarry et al. (2019) noted that reflection during the research process is becoming increasingly important in the social sciences. The need for reflection is driven by acknowledging that researchers, like their subjects, are relational, socialised into ways of being, and situated within the power hierarchies and norms of their communities.

Reflection plays an important role in uncovering the meanings hidden within participant accounts of lived experience. Engelsrud and Rosberg (2022) stressed that making space to hear the voice of the other requires the researcher to become attuned to the dialogues taking place inside themselves, inside the participant, and between the interviewer and participant. Becoming attuned to self and others is a skill that must be learned and practiced. Reflection is one way of developing and fine tuning this skill. For the researcher, reflection is part of assuming a “phenomenological attitude” and an essential tool for understanding the meaning and structures that underpin lived experiences (van Manen, 2014, p. 32).

van Manen (1997, p. 77) reminded researchers that “the purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try to grasp the essential meaning of something.” Reflection is ongoing and occurs throughout a research project. This is particularly important in the data collection and analysis stages where interpreting meaning is difficult as “the essence of a phenomenon is never simple or one dimensional” (van Manen, 1997, p. 78).

The act of writing and re-writing text is an essential part of the reflective process in interpretive phenomenological methods. Heidegger recommended keeping a reflective journal as a way of engaging the hermeneutic circle and facilitating the movement between the part and whole text (Lavery, 2003). van Manen (1997) devoted an entire

chapter to reflection. He believed that writing forces us into a reflective attitude and facilitates deep and meaningful insights and interpretations.

In this project, writing notes and short documents provided a way of reflecting on the meanings hidden within participants' stories. A reflective journal was kept throughout the data collection and analysis phases. In this journal I recorded notes about interviews, issues encountered, ideas and questions from readings, and changes in the direction of thinking about a transcript or interpretation. Discussions with my supervision team also provided a means of prompting reflection and new directions.

The processes of reflection, writing, and thinking were ongoing and iterative. Brief reflections on my own experiences of the adult ballet classroom and being a maturing recreational dancer were recorded after each class during the year leading up to the interviews. This process of observation and reflection was guided by Schön's model of reflection in action and reflection on action (Schön, 1991). These observations were re-read and considered weekly. This reflective activity helped me attune to the bodily sensations occurring during dance and the verbal and non-verbal social interactions taking place in the studio. These experiences guided the crafting of my interview questions. A similar iterative cycle of in-action and post-action reflection was used during the interview transcription and interpretation phases of this project.

Here an example entry from my journal where I applied Schön's model during and after an interview:

Reflection in action: While interviewing a participant I noticed that I was interrupting her flow of thought. This upset the participant and caused her to momentarily lose track of

her recollections. Once I realised what I had done and noticed the impact, I took a deep breath, pulled back, and let the participant tell her story her way.

Reflection on action: After the interview I sat down and reflected on my reasons for trying to direct the conversation. I asked myself why I had done that and reflected on the impact of my interruptions on the feelings of the participant. I realised that my actions were silencing her voice, oppressing her freedom, and causing her distress. This was contrary to the ethos of the project. I made a conscious effort not to repeat that action again. Before the next interview I reread the advice on phenomenological interviewing in van Manen (1997, 2014) and Quinney et al. (2016). This issue did not arise again.

Interview questions

The interview questions were carefully crafted to ensure that I had minimal influence on the direction and content of the stories unfolding (Dimler et al., 2017). Dance is a bodily phenomenon. It is an embodied way of being-in-the-world and being-with-others (Block & Kissell, 2001). Interview questions therefore focused on eliciting both emotional, physical, and physiological experiences of the ballet phenomenon. Open questions were followed by prompts for examples or more details. These questions were recorded in an interview guide (see Appendix E). The interview questions were tested in a pilot interview and changes to some questions were made.

The interview questions used were guided by the overarching research questions, the literature on adult recreational ballet and the researcher's experiences and observations of the adult recreational ballet classroom. Each set of questions was designed to prompt participants' reflections around different aspects of ballet practice, embodied being, and the social context in which recreational ballet takes place.

The warmup questions aimed to elicit prior experiences of ballet and the decisions that led the participants to begin or return to recreational classes as adults. The questions about the experience of being in the dance studio aimed to prompt reflection on participants' physical and mental preparations before classes and their experiences of the dance school environment. The questions on dancing while maturing aimed to uncover the physical and social realities of learning and performing a physical activity traditionally privileging youth and athleticism. The questions on dancing with others were designed to prompt reflections on the intersubjective experiences of dance. The questions on the dance world aimed to elicit participants' experiences of being maturing recreational dancers within the wider dance community.

The order in which questions were asked depended on the flow of the interview and where each participant's reflections took them. Not all questions were asked. When the interview went off-topic, prompts were used to gently nudge participants back to points of interest and unfinished reflections. When questions were not understood, they were asked again in a different way. Sometimes imagery or my own body was used to demonstrate an idea. When a participant did not wish to answer a question or the question caused distress, that topic was put aside, and the interview continued.

Hearing the participant's voice in the interview

Participants express themselves through their bodies. Researchers need to be attuned to this language as "embodied knowledge can be vaguely felt and difficult to express verbally" (Engelsrud & Rosberg, 2022, p. 1834). A researcher must also learn how and when to ask questions, and when to recognise the importance of silence and stillness. Interrupting silences may cause participants to "express superficial knowledge without addressing many of the different levels of lived bodily experience" (Engelsrud & Rosberg,

2022, p. 1836). Attending to what is said and unsaid is important as “people occasionally speak from their unspeakable layer during interviews” (Engelsrud & Rosberg, 2022, p. 1837). The researcher needs to listen to “hear and understand the layers of meaning in the answers” (Engelsrud & Rosberg, 2022, p. 1837).

In my role as an educator, I have learned to listen to others. I have learned to hear their spoken and unspoken words and read their body language. I have learned to wait through the silences and to have empathy when words and emotions overflow. All of these things enabled me to hear the participants’ voices, to glimpse the adult ballet phenomenon through their eyes and to grasp at its many possible meanings in their lives.

Interviews

Guides have been published on how to structure phenomenological interviews by, for example, Høffding and Martiny (2016), and on methods for lived experience interviewing by, for example, Bevan (2014). These felt restrictive and prescriptive. It was decided instead to seek advice on interview techniques and phenomenological questioning from Quinney et al. (2016) and van Manen (1997, 2014).

The participants’ lived experiences were collected using individual, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. At the heart of the phenomenological interviews was each participant’s pre-reflective story about their experience of the phenomenon. Quinney et al. (2016) proposed a framework of strategies for phenomenological interviewing based on the work of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. This framework requires researchers to address the “who, where, and how” when interviewing. Elements of

space, language, role, and trust help the interviewer to remain mindful of the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology.

The 'who' is the participant and their story. They are at the heart of the interview. Establishing a good rapport between researcher and participant is essential for building trust. Quinney et al. (2016) noted that a reciprocal relationship based on trust and mutual respect provides an environment where rich data may be generated. To establish a trust relationship, I ensured that my participants were informed about the interview purpose, the process, and my expectations. I took the time to ensure that they were comfortable and knew that they and their experiences were valued.

The 'where' is about "felt-space" (Quinney et al., 2016, p. 3). The location of the interview and the arrangement of space impacts the researcher, participant interaction, and the quality of participant responses. Interviews went for as long as the participant wanted, and the setting was at a location and time of their choosing.

The 'how' is about the way the interviews are conducted. A conversational interview style was used. Eliciting the thick, rich data of lived experience requires the researcher to be attentive to the participant's mood, language, and the way they deliver their stories. Open-ended questions were used to allow the "voice of dance" to be heard (Purser, 2008, p. 6). This approach prompted participants to reflect on their experiences and provide examples, stories, and anecdotes. van Manen (1997) noted that it is important to keep the participant as close as possible to the experience.

4.3.3 Transcription and thematic analysis

Transcribing the interviews

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The transcription process took between one and two weeks per transcript. Each interview was replayed twice before transcribing, and interview notes were reviewed. Following transcription, each interview was read twice before editing to remove repetitions, interview questions, and factual details that may identify the participant. The resulting six transcripts contained intense, rich, and emotionally deep accounts of maturing women's relationships with ballet.

Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis phase began in October 2021 and took over a year and a half to complete, such was the depth and richness of the data. The identification of participant themes was done in three stages.

The first stage involved refreshing my knowledge of qualitative thematic analysis by reading Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022), van Manen (1997, 2014) and Clark et al. (2021). van Manen's four categories of lived experience and the six methodological themes for researchers helped me identify an appropriate way forward.

van Manen (1997) identified four categories of meaning at the heart of lived experiences. These "lifeworld existentials" include "lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relation (relationality or communality)" (van Manen, 1997, p. 101). These were useful for reflecting on the data and grouping text into broad themes.

To identify themes within text and craft vivid anecdotes, van Manen (1997, pp. 30-31)

recommended:

(1) turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world; (2) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; (3) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; (4) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; (5) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; (6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

I used van Manen's recommendations to remain grounded and focused while dwelling in the participant stories.

For the second stage, I chose to focus on the content of the transcripts themselves without reference to theory or research literature. This decision to dwell in and with the data was prompted by Sloan and Bowe (2014, p. 1296) who noted that "the phenomenon itself can dictate how the data is analysed." I immersed myself in the participants' stories and let their words guide me to see the experience of adult recreational ballet through their eyes. From this came a set of 10 themes which were condensed into seven. These themes were used to identify theorists whose writings spoke to the data and could potentially illuminate new meanings within the participant stories. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002, 1964/1968), Goffman (1959, 1963b), and de Beauvoir (1949/1993, 1970/1972) were selected.

For the third stage, I chose to use an organically evolving iterative process of moving between the transcripts, to the theory and research literature, and back to the transcripts again. The decision to work in this manner came from my participation in a feminist collaborative online interview analysis workshop facilitated by Canadian and New Zealand dance academics (Markula, Jeffrey, Nikolai, Deol, Clout et al., 2023). The steps we trialled during the workshop suited the data and my preferred way of working.

In this third stage, the key themes for a particular theorist were assigned a colour. Each transcript was read separately with the writings of each theorist, and text matching a specific theme in the theory was highlighted in the matching colour. The transcripts were then gathered and the text from each theme was copied and pasted into a document. This document was repeatedly read in its parts and whole until common themes emerged. A summary document was then created. This integrated the participant experiences and the theorist's perspective with the supporting research literature. This process was repeated for each theorist. Throughout this cycle I wrote notes, pondered, read, and crafted anecdotes. The themes and insights concerning maturing women's relationships to ballet are discussed in Chapter Six.

Languaging bodily experiences through writing

A project focusing on lived experience calls the researcher to privilege embodied knowledge by "giving language to lived bodily experience" (Engelsrud & Rosberg, 2022, p. 1834). In this project, this was done through the crafting of anecdotes. Notes were written on my overall impressions and feeling for the phenomenon. Interesting statements, parts, and themes within the interviews were identified. Questions were asked of the texts, and initial interpretations and lists of interpreted statements were made. These statements became the basis of anecdotes.

Anecdotes are short texts that vividly reveal the experience of a phenomenon. Following van Manen (2014), selected statements were rewritten, edited, and refined to highlight the underlying phenomenological themes. As interpretive texts, anecdotes should be expressive, thoughtful, experiential, sensitive to the phenomenon, and engaging for the reader. This "lived thoroughness" helps the reader feel what it is like to experience the phenomenon and recognise the "possibilities of human life" (van Manen, 2014, p. 241).

Diagrams, pictures, and poetry were used to assist my reflection and the creation of sensuous, corporeally embodied anecdotes.

4.3.4 Research quality

Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that discussions about assessing quality tend to be missing from texts on phenomenological research. For this project, guidance on determining research quality therefore comes from general discussions of qualitative approaches.

Qualitative methodologies use a range of different methods of quality evaluation (Clark et al., 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Central to all methods is the requirement for methodological congruence. All steps in the research process must align with the methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this project, methodological congruence was maintained by embedding reflection activities throughout the research journey; through the re-reading of transcripts and thematic documents; and by revisiting van Manen's categories of lived experience and six methodological themes.

Authenticity and trustworthiness are considered the most important criteria when evaluating projects grounded in a constructionist epistemology and relativist ontology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Shannon and Hambacher (2014) provided a detailed discussion on the dimensions of authenticity and how these can be assessed in qualitative research. These dimensions are fairness (participant viewpoints are fairly represented in the research process); ontological and educative authenticity (participants develop increased awareness of their individual and social situations); and catalytic and tactical authenticity (engagement with the research prompts individuals to consider taking action regarding an issue). In this project, authenticity was enabled by allowing

participants time to reflect and respond to interview questions. Authenticity was assessed by keeping and reviewing field notes and a reflective journal.

Trustworthiness may be established through: the use of “corroborating evidence” drawn from multiple data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 260); researcher reflections; the keeping of an audit trail; triangulation between researcher, reader and participant perspectives; and the creation of rich, “thick descriptions” (Clark et al., 2021, p. 365). van Manen (2014, p. 348) added that the trustworthiness of a phenomenological study can be determined by “the originality of insights and interpretive processes demonstrated in the study.”

In this project, a variety of literature sources and the writings of three theorists were used to aid interpretations. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002, 1964/1968) allowed us to visualise the creation of social relationships through the intertwining of self and other in a chiasm formed through the reciprocity of perception and reversibility. This is most evident in the relationships between teachers and adult ballet learners. Goffman (1959, 1963b) highlighted how individuals work together to create organisations which meet their needs. In the current study this is most vividly illustrated in the way teachers and adult dancers worked together to create learning experiences free of stigma. de Beauvoir (1949/1993, 1970/1972) provided a lens on stereotypes which impact women’s experiences of maturing. Her works reveal the role of communities in creating opportunities for maturing women to resist oppression and find their freedom. Through the intertwining of these theoretical perspectives with the literature and the participant interview data, new insights into dancing while maturing were revealed.

With these perspectives, each interview transcript was read in full, reflected on, and interpreted three times from three different perspectives. Frequent immersion in the

data, the primary philosophical writings, and secondary sources helped maintain “a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon” (van Manen, 1997, p. 31). Researcher reflection played a central role in the research process. A presuppositions interview was conducted at the beginning of the project. A reflective journal was used throughout the project to record observations made during the participant interviews, other reflections, and notes relating to the literature. Journal entries were reviewed weekly during the preparation, interviewing, transcribing, and interpretation phases of the project. This provided an audit trail of decision making. Feedback from participants on the accuracy of transcripts or interpretations was not sought. As a team, the researcher and three supervisors worked together to ensure that participants’ lived experiences were accurately represented in the data analysis and resulting interpretations. All activities enabled the researcher to uncover new insights and meanings within the relationship between maturing women and recreational ballet.

4.4 Chapter summary

This study explored the question: What are the lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes? This chapter provided an outline of the research design underpinning the investigation. Central to all activities are the AUTEK principles and an ethical approach grounded in tikanga Māori. These were used to honour and safeguard the mana (dignity) and tino rangatiratanga (personal sovereignty) of the women and their stories. The recruitment and interviewing of six participants were outlined. The ethical considerations, participant recruitment, research questions, and methods used to analyse their stories were discussed in detail. The interviewing and thematic analysis procedures were described through a Merleau-Pontian approach. Interviewing was approached as an intersubjective and interaffective

experience that enabled the participants' voices to be clearly heard and reflected in the data. Researcher reflection was discussed as playing an important role in privileging the participants' lived experiences and seeking meaning in their stories. The use of reflection in the thematic analysis and writing process is interwoven throughout Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, as the themes in the participant stories and the meanings of recreational ballet are explored.

Chapter Five, "Findings", presents the findings from the participant interviews. This chapter presents the themes or essences at the heart of the participants' experiences of and relationships with the adult ballet phenomenon.

Chapter 5 Findings

The whole self is shaped in the experience of dance, since the body is besouled, bespirited, and beminded ... the body is lived through all of these aspects of dance. (Fraleigh, 1987, p. 11)

5.1 Introduction

This study investigates the lived experiences and meaning of recreational ballet in the lives of maturing women in New Zealand. Chapter One outlined the background and rationale for this project. Chapter Two summarised what is known about adult recreational ballet dancers in the literature and highlighted the attitudes to maturing professional bodies within the dance world. Chapter Three detailed the phenomenological and dramaturgical lenses used to view and interpret participant experiences of the ballet phenomenon. Chapter Four outlined the project research design with discussion on the ethical considerations, participant recruitment, and the methods used to collect and analyse the interview data. This chapter explores a selection of key themes that emerged from the participants' stories of their relationship to ballet and its meaning in their lives.

5.2 The participants

Table 1: Participants in this study

Participants	Age range	Ballet and other dance experience
Liza	30s	Childhood, adolescence, and adulthood
Abigail	50s	Childhood, adolescence, and adulthood
Firebird	60s	Childhood, adolescence, and adulthood
Jane	60s	Adulthood (7+ years)

Alice	70s	Childhood, adolescence, and adulthood
Natalia	70s	Childhood, adolescence, and adulthood

5.3 Key themes in the research findings

- Theme 1: Becoming a recreational ballet dancer.
- Theme 2: Missing pieces of myself.
- Theme 3: Embodying ballet as a physical and social practice.
- Theme 4: Ideals and realities.
- Theme 5: Teachers through the eyes of maturing dancers.
- Theme 6: Recreational dancing facilitates experiences of wellbeing.
- Theme 7: Dancing futures.

5.4 Theme 1: Becoming a recreational ballet dancer

The appeal of ballet as a recreational activity was discussed by all participants. Happy memories of dancing during childhood and adolescence motivated some to seek out ballet classes as maturing adults. For another, beginning ballet classes was a way of bringing stability into her life. For others, the appeal of ballet lay in the pleasure of moving to music, participating in an art form where athletic female bodies are privileged, and technical proficiency is required. Participants who had danced during childhood felt that the physical and mental demands of ballet aligned with their personalities.

5.4.1 Why ballet?

Alice, Firebird, Abigail, Jane, and Liza talked about the qualities of ballet that attracted them as children and adults. Alice and Firebird had happy memories of ballet as children. Alice “enjoyed it [ballet classes as a child]. It was great, it lifted my spirits ... I used to skip home. I can remember skipping home”. For Firebird, ballet class “became the place

where everything else disappeared, and I just concentrated on myself ... my space in the world. That was really, really important to me.” Firebird remembered “coming home and telling Mum that I hadn’t thought about anything else except where my arm was, where my shoulder was, where my little finger was ... I just loved that.” From a “very early age”, Firebird was attracted to ballet by its focus on “mindfulness” and being part of “a community of other people who enjoy the same thing.”

Watching strong female role models on stage was an appealing aspect of ballet for Abigail and Firebird. Abigail “loved and loves the strength and the precision ... that’s what I really liked about ballet.” Firebird would “happily watch both male and female dancers” but most appreciated witnessing “the strength of women.” Being able to “see a female body that is allowed to be as strong as a ballerina’s body is allowed to be” was particularly meaningful for Firebird. Like all dancers in this project, Firebird was also deeply moved by the music. She derived pleasure from “moving in sync with the world’s most beautiful music.” This was “just the best experience [squeals with excitement].”

Dance was always something that interested Jane. As a teenager, she “became interested in jazz ballet. I thought Limbs [Dance Company] was just the coolest thing out.” Jane “joined a local jazz ballet class – one of those things taught at night in a draughty, dimly lit church hall by somebody with enthusiasm if no exceptional skill.” At university Jane found a beginner’s jazz ballet class. However, other commitments and “the distractions of normal life” meant that dance remained on the periphery. Jane began classical ballet classes in her 50s. At that time Jane’s life was “unravelling and everything had changed. It was sort of unreal and I was uncomfortable and didn’t really know what I was doing. The ground underneath my feet was shifting.” While reading her local newspaper, Jane “saw an article on adult ballet. I thought ‘Ohhh’ – It didn’t

seem weird or anything at that stage.” This was the beginning of Jane’s journey into ballet. Ballet became a source of stability in her life. The love for ballet “has been a huge surprise”. Jane “never expected it to be the passion that it has become.”

Liza was at a low point in her life and realised that she needed a change of direction. While lying in bed at the beginning of a new year, Liza wondered “if I died tomorrow what would I regret the most about my life? ... The two answers for me were not dancing and not travelling.” It was this “moment of honesty” that prompted Liza to seek out adult ballet classes. At no point in her journey has Liza regretted her decision to return to dance.

5.4.2 Ballet suits my personality

Abigail, Natalia, Firebird, and Liza reflected on the match between ballet’s demand for perfection and their personalities. Abigail liked “how ballet relates to me as a person. The perfectionism ... I really like that ... there is a right way and a wrong way [to do something].” Natalia was attracted to “the perfection in movement”. Liza felt that “ballet reflects how I am naturally.”

Liza has studied a variety of dance genres including jazz and ballet. Jazz allowed Liza to be “a little bit out there, a little fabulous”. Ballet, however, has always been her first love. Liza was attracted to ballet by the controlled technique and appearance of effortless on stage. Ballet was “a lot more restrained, a lot more controlled, a lot more understated in terms of how it’s carried out. It doesn’t mean that the effort is not there.” Liza felt that this aligns with her own personality. She described herself as wanting to look “like I’m easy going but anything less than 100% is a [expletive] failure [roaring laughter].”

5.4.3 Summary

For dancers who danced in childhood, ballet was a connection back to treasured memories of joy and a sense of wellbeing. These experiences helped shape their personalities and outlook on life. As maturing adults, ballet and dance provided all participants with a means of grounding themselves and creating stability in an ever-changing and sometimes turbulent world.

5.5 Theme 2: Missing pieces of myself

All dancers recalled searching, as adults, for and being unable to find recreational ballet classes. For those who had danced as children, the absence of ballet in their lives was strongly felt. The participants filled this gap with other dance genres and fitness activities, all the while searching the news media for opportunities to return to ballet classes. When they finally found a class, all dancers were faced with the realities of being maturing bodies. The decision to dance while maturing was met with mixed reactions from the participants' families and social networks.

The scarcity of recreational ballet classes for adults was reflected throughout the participants' stories. Abigail, Firebird, and Alice described searching newspapers and the internet for adult ballet classes. Abigail found social dance classes were offered but "as an adult there has never been places to go and do adult ballet." When Firebird began looking for adult ballet classes, she was surprised that "where I'm living there are 15 or 20 yoga classes I could get to on any given day ... there is so much happening but why isn't it happening for dance?"

Firebird was used to "Googling everything and anything" without a second thought. However, searching for adult ballet classes was something that required more caution

and care. Firebird recounted that “the actual thing I Googled were the two words ‘ballet’ and ‘adult’. That was a lot braver. You can say you do dance but to say you do ballet just felt kind of hmmm.”

Alice stopped ballet classes in her mid-teens when she met her first boyfriend. On reflection, Alice realised that “I could have enjoyed a lot more things [in life] if I had carried on with ballet but I think the opportunity slipped away because other things took over.” Alice returned to dancing in her 70s after seeing adult ballet featured on a current affairs show on television. Alice said to herself, “Yeah, this is just what I want [enthusiastic]. I rang up and the next day I was there [glee/excited laughter].”

In the absence of ballet classes, Abigail, Natalia, Firebird, and Liza sought out dance wherever they could. Driven by a desire to immerse themselves again in the experience of moving to music and being moved by the music. The participants enrolled in contemporary, modern, ballroom, Latin, rock and roll, Ceroc, Zumba, aerobics, and dance fitness classes.

Joining aerobics enabled Abigail “to move to music ... that was my dance ... my dance lesson in disguise.” Missing ballet, Natalia joined “a dance fitness programme, but it had a dance background or dance basis and again the music did it for me there.” These experiences were enjoyable but did not fill the gap that the absence of ballet left in their lives.

Firebird had a wakeup call when “friends around me were starting to have trouble with knees, hips and health. ... I thought it will be my turn soon if I don’t do something, so I sent myself off on the yoga workshop.” Firebird tried “various other forms of exercise” but the love of ballet “just stayed as this thing that I realised that I was still missing it

[ballet].” When Firebird was in her mid-50s, she had an “epiphany that if I didn’t do the things I wanted to do now then I didn’t know if I would be able to do them again.” At a yoga retreat, Firebird realised “this is not me, I’m a dancer. I had to then find dance again immediately. That was really a turning point. It is very sad to think that I didn’t have it [ballet] for a good portion of my adult life.”

After leaving dance as a 15-year-old, Liza dabbled in a variety of dance forms:

[She] started doing a random term here, a term there, of beginner ballet, tap and contemporary, which is really hard when you are overweight cause getting up and down off the floor. I’m just going to put that out there. I’m either up or down! I can’t do both!

When the participants were successful in finding adult ballet classes, they often found that adult meant teenagers or young adults. Some dancers persisted and others gave up in frustration and embarrassment. Abigail “often searched for ballet classes and looked up ‘ballet’ and ‘adult’.” To her disappointment she always found that “in ballet, adults are about 16 or 17 [years old].” Her searching always ended with the realisation that “I’m not going en pointe and a size 10 ... so there’s no point and they [the other dancers] will have been at a higher level than what I was and I’m just not going to do that [to myself].”

Natalia found an advanced class but was dismayed to find that it was full of “young 20 and 30-year-olds who could kick their legs up around here and leap and jump ... while some of us stayed glued to the ground [starts giggling] and did what we could.” Natalia moved to another school and found that “again adults ... you know, 20 to 30 years old”.

Others found that adult classes were taken less seriously by the teachers. Firebird’s nearest class was over an hour away from where she lived. The class was taught by a

“young woman who was busy doing other things and she often wouldn’t turn up or the church hall would be closed.”

Some returning dancers found that adult ballet classes were targeted at absolute beginners and were not suitable for maturing adults. Natalia recalled that “while I wasn’t a beginner, it had been a long time since I had done ballet, I thought I should start here. I went to a workshop ... an hour-and-a-half long. It killed my knees [laughs] ... grand pliés [roaring laughter] after such a long time.”

5.5.1 Reactions from family and friends

Spouses and partners tended to be very supportive of maturing dancers’ desires to return to ballet classes. Natalia’s husband “was very supportive ... most men think, oh no, I don’t want to go to your ballet concerts, but [Natalia’s husband] is right in there.”

Friends and workmates were less supportive of the dancers. They did not always understand why maturing adults would want to take up dance classes. Alice recalled that her “friends fell about laughing when I said that I dance. One still laughs uproariously.” Alice felt “like kicking him in the shins! He still thinks it’s a huge joke. The others think it’s a joke but they laugh and say ‘We are not surprised’ ... because I took up the harp when I was 70.”

Firebird recalled one of her friends “said ‘Oh, what do you do, just float about with a few scarfs or something?’ That didn’t go down very well.” Firebird protested that ballet was “a fully developed art form and you work very hard at it and the scarfs come later once you have the technique sorted.”

Most dancers did not speak of their families in detail. While spouses were supportive, the dancers in this project appeared reluctant to dance in front of their families or to involve them in their dancing activities. Natalia does not:

use the word 'ballet'. I tell people I go to dancing. Even in my family, I just say I go to dancing, although they know that I've done ballet. I don't use the word because I don't feel like I'm a ballerina. Physically in my head I am ...[silence].

Alice, Firebird, Jane, and Natalia discussed the experience of performing on stage before an audience. For most the experience was positive, and they felt that the maturing body has a place on the stage. Natalia was concerned that maturing bodies, particularly adult beginners, should not be made to perform on stage. Natalia felt that very maturing beginners were neither ballet or quality entertainment.

Natalia cautioned that we must be careful not to:

put pressure on those people to perform on the stage. ... There comes a time when you are a very mature adult. You don't feel that performing is going to give the audience pleasure in watching an elderly person trying to be a ballerina ... not when they can see beautiful ballet done properly. ... If I was a beginner I may not want those people watching me ... we shouldn't perhaps allow a lot of people to watch us older people ... some people may not mind [being on display], but others could withdraw.

5.5.2 Finding the right adult ballet community

Firebird and Alice were frustrated at not finding a ballet class that was right for them. Firebird expressed dismay at discovering that her classmates at one school "didn't feel the same passion that I did. Those particular women didn't. The whole thing just wasn't a successful experience. So I kept on looking and then one day literally it [another adult ballet class] just popped up." Alice had a similar experience. She was disappointed to

discover that at one school her classmates viewed ballet as “a gym session” rather than an art form.

Alice and Abigail talked about their excitement, delight, and relief at finally finding ballet classes suitable for maturing bodies. Alice remembered:

feeling as if I was accepted. I’m an older woman, I’m not the ideal shape, I’m not the ideal size or physical ability. But I thought, “I think I will be accepted here.” I felt comfortable ... I feel more free to express myself in my current school and I felt that as soon as I went in.

Abigail found that classes designed for maturing bodies “allow you to be who you are because actually that’s what you love to do and you don’t have to be ... little [slim] while you are doing it and that just made me teary [begins to cry].”

5.5.3 Starting ballet as an adult is like being a fish out of water

Jane started ballet in her mid-50s. She did not come with a background of childhood classes and the associated bodily and social knowledge that this entails. Concerned about making a fool of herself, Jane contacted the studio owner and asked if she could attend a trial class. Jane felt her decision to start ballet was “no stranger than all the other things that were going on in my life at the time”. Before her first class, Jane “sat in the changing room and took photographs of my feet, because I thought we might never see this sight again – my feet in pink ballet slippers.”

Like Natalia and Abigail, Jane discovered that her ‘adult’ ballet class was full of young adults. Jane had a sinking feeling when she realised that “20-year-olds are adults as well.” The dancer standing next to Jane “was honestly about a third my age, half my height and about a quarter of my weight. I mean I was sort of thrilled, but I did feel very like a fish out of water.” Jane fell in love with ballet and convinced the studio owner to

start a class for the over-50s. A few months afterwards a new class started for maturing adults.

5.5.4 Excitement turns into reality

The excitement of finding a class was often followed by the reality of walking back into the studio for the first time as an adult. Fear and uncertainty led Alice, Firebird, Liza, and Jane to question their decision. Will I remember how to dance? Am I capable of dancing? Am I too old to dance? Do I belong here?

Alice confessed to feeling “quite nervous ... I thought, ‘Ohhh, I don’t know if I want to do this’ [soft nervous voice] ... ‘Is it going to be alright?’ But once I was in the class I was fine ... all my ballet training came back to me.”

Firebird found classes at the studios of a professional ballet company. Firebird felt “so lucky” but “was absolutely terrified because I knew I could do some basic steps, but could I actually do it? ... Well there might be young women in there ... you know ... able to leap around the room and things like that.”

Liza recalled that when she returned to ballet classes she was at her “heaviest weight.” Walking into the studio “was no small step. That was the moment that I realised I’m in my late 30s and I could have done this earlier and that the only person who was holding me back was me.” Liza found the experience “scary. I was quite afraid of being judged. I was hot and uncomfortable ... I had to keep in the back of my mind that I came here because this is what I wanted to do.” Liza decided to “try it and see what it’s like ... if I don’t feel how I remember feeling when I danced [as a child] then at least I had a go.”

Jane recalled thinking, before her first ballet class, that she was “too old, too tall, too fat ... there is nothing about me that says that I should be doing ballet ... if you compare me

with a beautiful slender young ballet dancer who doesn't like eating [loud laughter]."

Jane had to overcome those thoughts. She asked herself, "Do I mind what other people think?" Jane decided:

You know what, let them laugh, I don't care. I've got to the stage where I'm confident enough ... if people laugh at me ... talk about me ... whatever, I really don't care. I know what I'm all about and they obviously don't.

5.5.5 Summary

For dancers who danced in childhood, the absence of ballet in their lives was experienced as a deep sense of loss and a feeling that pieces of themselves were missing. The scarcity of schools teaching adult ballet added to feelings of exclusion. Finding the right school, while exciting, also forced the participants to face the inescapable realities of being maturing bodies in a youthful and technically demanding art form.

5.6 Theme 3: Embodying ballet as a physical and social practice

The dancers spoke at length about the experience of incorporating ballet technique into their bodies. Being maturing adults imposed constraints and offered advantages when learning ballet. As with professional dancers, injuries were a constant concern. The participants described the various self-care strategies used to prevent and manage injuries. The dancers' accounts also revealed an ever-present tension between the awareness of their physical capabilities and their deep desire to challenge themselves to progress and perfect ballet technique. The participants gave detailed accounts of the strategies they used to embody and perform ballet to the best of their abilities. Observation of teachers and other dancers was particularly important when learning technique and artistry. This tension between being maturing bodies and dancing in a

genre that privileges youth and athleticism was present in the accounts of dancers from all decades.

5.6.1 Being a maturing body in a physically demanding art form

Returning to ballet classes required dancers to come to terms with the physical capabilities of their maturing bodies. Natalia wanted to dance at a higher level “but the body has limitations. Your body only goes so far ... but I would love to give it a go.” Abigail recalled that “once upon a time ballet would have been really easy, now it’s like ‘Ohh, aww, cramp, cramp, cramp’ [describes a dance sequence] ... I thought ‘Ohhh, I will be so glad when this is finished’.”

Liza recalled feeling changes in physical abilities from her early 30s. She noticed that her body no longer moved in the same way that she remembered moving in childhood. Liza sensed that her “body in space is quite different from my body on the inside.” She “really noticed how much more difficult things were for me to do, firstly because of my size and secondly because I was that much older.” Liza found this “a major frustration ... even now the muscle memory is still there. I remember lifting my leg in the perfect second position, and now I’m struggling to get it to 45 degrees.”

Prior health concerns made it difficult for Jane and Alice to execute some ballet movements and sequences. Jane found that “physically it’s been a challenge because I’ve had several operations and I’ve got all sorts of things like arthritis.” Alice “had many operations, so my health has not been good, but having said that I feel that I’m healthy now.” She observed that as a maturing adult her attitude to ballet changed from seeking technical perfection to compromise and acceptance of her body. Alice felt that “as long

as I am in the right direction and my muscles are working correctly, then that's ok. It's all about compromise ... [you] can compromise and make it look graceful."

Natalia found that her cardiovascular endurance declined as she matured. Natalia wished that she "could do it [leaping and grand jetés], but then I say come on, expectations ... you are not 20 or 30 years old. You do what you can and what your body will allow you to do."

Firebird noticed changes in her ability "to follow the sequences" of steps. Firebird felt that her "brain and the body are slightly less connected." When she was younger, Firebird recalled hearing "do three of those and then one of those and that's what you do ...[now] there's a bit of interference, and it's like, hang on, what was that?"

5.6.2 Injuries and maturing bodies

Abigail noted that maturing recreational dancers "have had a few knocks, bumps and bruises along the way." Liza, Abigail, Firebird, and Natalia spoke in detail about their experiences of injury and the anxiety this caused.

Injuries were attributed to a lack of practice, age, lack of warm-up before class, ignoring minor injuries, and sedentary lifestyles. Liza commented that "children do a lot of things quite naturally and they don't get hurt. We get injured because we get out of practice [wild laughter]." Abigail recalled "[injuring my] Achilles and trying to lift my leg. I thought [gasps] I can't do it. I just cannot do it. The strength isn't there. I've got out of kilter, out of season or whatever." After a serious injury in dance class, Firebird realised that "I do have to be slightly more careful. I didn't warm up ... it was upsetting. I have never really had any injury before then, I'm quite fit. It was very embarrassing [laughs]." Firebird now worries "about doing other things that might mean I get an injury and I couldn't do

ballet. ... It would be a huge loss to me to not be able to dance.” Natalia had recently resumed dancing after a connective tissue injury. This was an unwelcome reminder of being a maturing body and interrupted her ability to express herself by “giving to the movement.”

Injuries were attributed to ignoring or not being aware of the warning signs. Liza felt devastated when she injured herself. Liza was afraid that she “was never going to dance again. I was [expletive] terrified.” Liza was “pretty sure I experienced the same anxiety that a professional ballerina does when they blow their ACL.” She had planned to practice pirouettes en pointe but “didn’t even get that far.” Liza “went to sleep that night, woke up the next day and I couldn’t point my feet.” Liza later found out that she had seriously injured her quadricep and knee. Looking back Liza realised that she had “been dancing on an injury for a year [roaring laughter].” For Liza, her injuries reflected “the realities of a day-to-day job that involves a lot of sitting” rather than “the ageing process.” Liza observed that “sometimes my enthusiasm outstrips what my body is able to do.”

5.6.3 Preventing injuries through increased self-awareness and self-care

Natalia and Alice, both in their 70s, were adamant that injuries can be prevented by warming up before classes and by conditioning. Warming up is part of their pre-class rituals. Natalia observed that she and her classmates spend a lot of time sitting in cars and they need to warm up before class rather than socialising. Natalia felt that her “body is not used to that. The muscles need stretching. The joints need bending. I need to prepare my body to move. I can’t just get up and move, I would be really stiff and awkward. I need to warm up.” Alice made “sure the heater in the car is on so that my feet are reasonably warm when I get there. I like to have a chat to everybody, and I like

to do some heel raises and shakes. I would rather be moving than just sitting and waiting for class.” In contrast to Natalia and Alice, Liza, the youngest participant, admitted that she was “not very disciplined at stretching and I’ve got zero discipline at warming up and end up very sore.”

Alice reflected on how self-care practices were not taught when she danced as a child. As an adult, she became “much more aware” that stretching and good nutrition before class are essential. Warming up should be “part of the lesson.” Alice no longer takes her health “for granted. Now I’m thinking, ‘Have I had enough to drink, have I had some protein?’ ... My body is going to work so it needs to be looked after.”

5.6.4 Muscle memory aids learning ballet as an adult

Acquiring and perfecting ballet technique was a preoccupation and key goal for all maturing dancers in this study. Liza commented that she would “never be a professional dancer. But I can certainly aspire to the same level of technique.” Abigail noted that refining her “technique and completing a goal brings a sense of achievement.”

When reflecting on her journey, Jane noted that ballet “didn’t come ... naturally. It wasn’t as though I was coming home to myself.” Learning ballet technique was difficult for Jane. As a maturing beginner she did not possess the muscle memory usually developed in childhood. This process was particularly difficult as Jane felt she was “not terribly in touch with” her own body. Dance practice, particularly ballet, requires a degree of self-awareness and connection within oneself that may be unfamiliar and challenging to the novice adult learner.

The experience of being an adult returner was different to being an adult beginner. Muscle memory was particularly important for adult returnees. Returners who danced

in childhood reported having well-developed muscle memory. Muscle memory played an important role in cementing new movements into the body and building new technique. Memories of childhood ballet helped Firebird cope with her returning to classes as an adult. For Firebird, the experience was “like riding a bicycle. You didn’t forget how to do it. I probably just forgot how to connect with it.” As well as recalling the dance steps, Firebird “remembered all of that beautiful language.”

Liza, Alice, and Abigail testified to the deeply embodied and subconscious nature of muscle memory. Liza was often given technique corrections by her teachers “for doing things that to me feel quite natural.” Liza noted that “people doubt muscle memory ... 30 years down the track it is definitely still there.” Alice learned tap dancing as a 12-year-old. After a “60-year” gap, Alice resumed tap classes. In her first class, Alice recalled that “suddenly I could remember the time step [excitement]. ... The time step is quite hard to do ... but it just came back to me.”

For Abigail, muscle memory created health issues in adulthood. Abigail started experiencing headaches which she attributed to the ballet posture embodied during childhood. Abigail observed that “in ballet you are taught to hold your head up quite high [demonstrates] ... you don’t carry yourself like that naturally.” For Abigail, “muscle memory isn’t such a good thing [roaring laughter]. Now I focus on keeping my head down [in neutral].”

5.6.5 Being a maturing body has advantages

Liza recalled that, as children, “you were shown what to do and you did it.” Natalia, Abigail, and Liza reported that, as adults, they have a greater understanding and appreciation for movement and artistry. Natalia suggested that “what I have now [skill

or expression] is greater than what I had then.” Natalia felt that her ability to analyse and understand ballet technique had improved as she matured.

Natalia, Abigail, and Liza reported that, as adults, they were able to consciously apply new technical and bodily knowledge to their dance practice. This encouraged them to push their physical boundaries and express themselves in new ways. As a result, they experienced increased enjoyment from dancing. Natalia was able to “extend her movements” and push herself further. Dance taught Abigail “that if I want to tweak that bit of me, I can ... you know you can balance because you know you can make your body do whatever you want.” Liza remarked that as “a child, you think a lot less ... about your movements in space.” Liza researched the “mechanics and physiology of movement” and applied this knowledge to improve her technique and control.

As a child, Liza was “anxious and very conscious of pleasing my parents and doing very well.” As an adult, Liza worries a “lot less about stuffing up.” She now focuses on enjoying the experience and this has allowed Liza to work on improving her technique. Liza felt that “getting technique right and getting better makes me happy. It’s kind of a symbiotic relationship.”

5.6.6 Embodying ballet technique is a process

All participants reported using similar strategies for learning new steps and sequences. Being fully engaged in the learning process and consciously aware of one’s physical sensations, emotions, and external surroundings were central to all accounts.

The participants prepared themselves physically and mentally before learning new material. Natalia observed that physical preparation was particularly important for maturing dancers as ballet is demanding on the body. Alice’s prior injuries required her

to be aware of her “placement in the studio” and to have alternative strategies available to her for performing arm movements.

The participants then listened attentively to their teacher’s instructions and watched them execute each step. Alice noted that the class then “walk[ed] it through.” This helped commit the sequence to memory. Individual dancers reported using a variety of strategies to embody the movements. Abigail and Liza visualised the instructions and thought about the flow of energy through their bodies. Abigail focused on “remembering the feeling” of a particular step before she attempted it. Alice counted the music and repeated the instructions in her head. Jane broke the sequences down into smaller movements, a letter of the alphabet was assigned to each step, these were compiled into a list and the list was memorised through verbal and physical repetition. Natalia, Firebird, and Liza watched and followed their classmates when they forgot the steps or if the teacher’s instructions made no sense. Liza noted that learning new movements “sometimes just takes someone explaining it in plain English.” Firebird observed that “the camaraderie and support that you get in those classes” makes learning new skills easier and enjoyable.

The participants reported that, when learning new steps and sequences, they were attentive to their breathing, balance, and the order with which they executed each movement. Firebird focused on “small changes to the body, that slight positioning ... the things that are more difficult.” Liza focused on “trying to hold my core” and moving her shoulder blades “up, back and down.” Alice made sure that she was “breathing and pulling up.” Firebird, Liza, and Natalia focused on their turnout and moving their feet first and arms second. Firebird reflected on this and noted that “sometimes you have to learn it just with the feet first and then you add the arms in later.” Liza found that this

'to-do list' has become automatic and this enabled her to enter "a meditative state" while dancing.

5.6.7 Learning by watching your classmates

Ballet technique is embodied through observation, mimesis, and practice. The dancers' accounts of watching and being watched reflect the highly visual nature of ballet as a performing art. The participants invested considerable time in watching others. Teachers and professional dancers were viewed as role models. Particular attention was paid to the positioning of the body, technique, and artistry. Participants had mixed feelings about their classmates and watched them with a critical eye. The dancers' reflections also revealed an awareness of how they, as maturing adults, are viewed by other dancers and their audiences.

Firebird, Alice, and Natalia were the only dancers to talk in detail about using studio observations to improve their technique and artistry. In class, Firebird positioned herself behind other dancers so she could pick up tips on movements and artistry. Firebird loved "watching them. ... I love seeing how they achieve more expression using their arms." Alice recalled enjoying watching her classmates "when the class is split [in two]". She used the opportunity to improve her own technique. These occasions brought out Alice's competitive side and she resolved to "do this [sequence] better this time [excitement], because the others are all cheating! [roaring laughter]." Alice noted that "some people like to stay at the back ... I think it is quite good to observe each other." Natalia watched other dancers when she had "forgotten the choreography [roaring laughter] ... the teacher has just told us what to do, now it's time to start, and I have forgotten ... that's when I want to take a check around the class."

Awareness of differences in physical appearance were highlighted when dancing in groups. Jane recalled an awkward moment during a rehearsal. Her class was “on stage ... I was taller than any of them ... it was a bit odd when ... our hands [met] in the middle [demonstrates].” Jane felt very self-conscious about her height when she looked and compared herself to the other dancers.

5.6.8 Learning by watching the teacher’s body

All participants spoke at length about their teachers. They viewed them as both role models and learning tools. The dancers closely watched the teachers’ bodies, their technique and expressions, to see what improvements were needed.

Abigail paid “no attention to anyone else ... other people don’t matter because other people can get technique wrong ... it’s me, the teacher and that’s all that matters.”

Natalia saw her teacher as “perfection, beautiful technical perfection.” Alice saw her teachers as “elegant, fit, very graceful ladies. If only ... [roaring laughter]. They are great role models.”

Jane viewed her teacher as:

the move in its pure form, as the ideal ... it [ballet] is so inbuilt in her. It’s just automatic. ... When she [the teacher] demonstrates yoga poses, she is just muscle ... her haunches are all muscle. She is so strong ... that’s why she can do those jumps ... she naturally assumes an elegant figure ... naturally looks beautiful because she is so tiny ... she doesn’t have any surplus weight disguising the movements. She’s just her skeleton.

Firebird and Alice watched their teachers for specific technical guidance on movement sequences and artistry. Firebird observed “how they can join a series of movements together to make a dance ... the selection of transition steps between one particular pose and another pose. Is that done with beauty as well? How [do] you start and finish?”

For Firebird, the teacher is the living embodiment of centuries of ballet tradition. All aspects of studio practice must be done with “respect for the art.”

Alice always looked “at the teacher, because that is what they are there for.” When watching her teacher, Alice focused on “the total movement ... while watching I feel as if I am performing the movement.”

5.6.9 Learning by watching role models on stage and in the media

Jane and Firebird were the only participants to describe their experiences of watching and thinking about professional ballet dancers. Jane reflected on the experience of reading an article on the development of the ballet body from Margot Fonteyn to the present day. Jane was very surprised to see that Fonteyn’s foot “en pointe wasn’t that gorgeous thing that you see these days ... the article went right up to Misty Copeland. She’s an athlete. You look at her calves and they are honestly like bricks.”

Firebird was the only dancer to talk about watching professional dancers on stage, seeing:

all the hard work that’s in there because I can feel it! That’s possibly different from my friends [non-dancers] who are watching it. They don’t see what I see. I see the hard work that went into it. I see the possible pain that’s on the stage at that moment, and then I see the dancer rising like a Phoenix above the pain to deliver to the audience. To deliver a story. To deliver the magic from another realm that is not in the everyday world.

When watching professional dancers, Firebird paid particular attention to the artistry and theatricality of the performance. Firebird particularly enjoyed watching how Marianela Núñez “uses her face ... she is as much an actress as she is a dancer, and she just delivers ... she takes you to a place you’ve never been before.”

5.6.10 Young adult dancers watching maturing dancers

Alice was the only dancer to talk about her experiences interacting with young adult dancers in the studio. Alice recalled that “everyone is very friendly. I’m surprised that younger dancers would take an interest in maturing dancers.” Alice was “flabbergasted the first time that they wanted to watch us perform [bemused expression]. They were really genuinely interested [emphasis] which is lovely.”

Alice suspected that the Ryman television advertisements and the increased media coverage of adult ballet has prompted younger dancers to think about dancing as recreation for maturing adult bodies. Alice felt the advertisements made viewers ask themselves “Is it possible for adults to dance, enjoy it and do it well? I think it has definitely [emphasis] made people think.”

5.6.11 Practice makes perfect

All participants found that the process of learning new movements was enjoyable and frustrating. All dancers talked about investing a lot of time practicing outside of class in order to cement new movements or sequences into their bodies. While preparing for a show, Jane recalled watching the rehearsal videos “three or four times a day” for a month. Jane repeatedly paused the video, wrote out the steps, and drew diagrams until she had memorised all parts of the performance.

Practice often took place while doing other everyday activities. Jane used any opportunity to “do a little move. Sometimes when I’m waiting by the microwave, I’ll be standing on one leg, or doing that with my arms [demonstrates], or I will do some ballet moves.” Liza admitted to being “pretty ad hoc” about practice. She worked on “her nemesis, pliés in second” and “very basic technique while doing the dishes and brushing

my teeth.” Liza practiced her arms and complicated leg movements when she was doing other things. Liza recalled practicing movements “until it feels normal and then I’m not having to think about it.”

5.6.12 Learning to feel and be affected by music

The musical score in a ballet performance guides the dancers’ movements, adds depth and emotional intensity to the story being told, and creates engagement between the dancers and audience. The participants reflected at length on the importance of music and musicality in their relationship with ballet. For the participants, music facilitated self-expression and became a pathway to heightened feelings of emotional wellbeing and happiness.

Alice, Firebird, Natalia, Abigail, and Liza talked about feeling the music in their bodies and being emotionally moved by it. Alice was very aware of this relationship. She commented that “you can enjoy the music in your mind but you actually want your body to enjoy it.” When Alice danced to music she enjoyed, she said “that nothing else matters [emphasis] ... I relax and the anxiety disappears ... if I’ve been anxious about something it doesn’t really matter now.” Alice felt that “you can actually take it off like a cardigan and put it away.” Firebird felt “hopeless at classical music concerts. I just cannot bear to sit still. [laughs loudly].” When she hears music “I want to move to it ... that’s what we do [in class], we are inserting ourselves into and becoming part of the most beautiful music.” Natalia was “inspired by the music ... my dance comes from in here [motions to her heart] but the music comes to me and then the dance comes out of that ... the music affects me here [heart]. I get quite emotional [laughs].”

Abigail, Liza and Natalia reflected on how they responded physically when hearing music. When Abigail heard music of any genre, her first thought was “how can I move to it?” Natalia described how “the music affects the movement for me ... the minute they put the music on, my body goes straight into preparation. It just responds immediately.” Liza recalled feeling the music in her body and automatically responding to it. She has learned to listen carefully to music, to count the beats, and identify the rhythms. Liza has become attuned to “naturally” knowing “what’s going to be expected” and “what my body is going to want to do.” Liza can listen to a piece of “music and know that there will be a grand battement ... a pirouette ... or a grand allégro exercise.”

Natalia and Alice reflected on how the music also calls them to express emotion in different ways. Natalia strongly felt that “dance is where I can express myself. I don’t have that ability to express myself verbally in the same way.” For her, moving to music is “an emotional” experience. Natalia commented that she “really can’t get beyond the music. The music says ‘give’ or it says ‘be angry’ or ‘be loving’ and then the body projects that to the audience [roaring laughter].” For Alice the music “talks to me about the dance, it talks to me about the spectacle that will happen on stage.” For some dancers, music brings back memories of life events. Alice recollected that “I can’t hear the Slaves’ Chorus without tears coming to my eyes [Alice’s eyes tear up and she breathes deeply lost for a moment in the memory] ... music can do that.” For returnees, music mattered much more now than during childhood.

5.6.13 Progressing dance skills and artistry

Alice, Firebird, Liza, and Natalia spoke about their aspirations to improve their technique and artistry. Underpinning the desire to progress is the belief that improvement is always possible. Alice felt that “I don’t think I’m ever going to be really, really good, but

I have to get better [emphasis].” Jane said that she believes “that I can get better ... I think there is still the ability to improve ... and I still have the capacity to learn new things.” This was tempered by her knowledge that maturing dancers have “got a bit of a problem because time is running out very fast. We are fighting against time and yet ballet takes forever to learn. The improvements are very slow and gradual.”

Alice was aware that her ability to progress was sometimes limited by prior health conditions. She reflected on her experience of trying a higher-level class. Alice “found it hard, but ... quite rewarding.” Alice’s limited mobility meant that she “couldn’t perform the steps perfectly. I thought about it afterwards and felt good because I did the best I could do and I looked graceful.”

The dancers expressed frustration when teachers did not share their beliefs in their abilities to grow their skills and technique. Firebird wanted “to be able to progress and be shown how to do this ... but the slight issues I have with the senior classes is that we aren’t actually progressing as much as what we could.” Liza recalled a decisive moment in her adult dance experience. Her adult ballet class consisted of performing the same exercises each week. Liza felt that she “couldn’t progress ... I really wanted to be able to progress. I like structure and I like having a goal to work towards.” Liza approached her teacher who responded “‘I don’t think that the director will agree. ... What are you going to do with it?’ [Laughs in frustration.] My answer was ‘What are most of your child students going to do with it?’ Nothing.”

5.6.14 Summary

Ballet is a performing art that uses the body and movement as a means of expression. As such, the dancers dedicated considerable time and thought to injury prevention and

the care of their maturing bodies. The dancers used a variety of strategies to embody ballet technique and cultural practices. With support from their teachers, the dancers were able to push the limits of their physical capabilities to grow their ballet technique and artistry.

5.7 Theme 4: Ideals and realities

Comparisons between the ideal ballet aesthetic and the dancers' maturing selves were a recurring theme throughout their reflections. Studio mirrors, video learning aids, and commercially available dancewear all served to remind participants that they were not the youthful dancers remembered from childhood or depicted in dance industry marketing, on the stage, and in the media. By learning ballet, wearing ballet costumes, and performing on stage, the participants affirmed and validated their dancer identities and reinforced their sense of belonging within the ballet community. In doing so, the participants actively challenged the stereotypes of the ballet body and who can dance ballet.

5.7.1 Real dancers do not look like me

The messages about what constitutes a desirable body for ballet were relayed by teachers to those participants who had danced during childhood. These messages were communicated directly and indirectly.

Natalia knew by her early teens that she "didn't have any physical attributes for ballet" so she stopped dancing. Abigail and Firebird had similar experiences. Abigail "knew as a child that I never would be [a professional dancer] ... so there was no point dreaming [sad, deep, guttural]." Firebird remembered feeling, as a child, that "I never ever measured up ... I wasn't the right shape, the right size." Firebird felt that she "was

absolutely fine” but “didn’t look right somehow.” Her teacher “had no intention to progress me in any way”.

These negative messages about the ballet body and who can be a ballet dancer impacted how Natalia, Firebird, and Abigail felt about themselves as adults. Natalia felt that she is “a ballet dancer, but I also know that I’m not ... you wouldn’t look at me and say that person is a dancer.” Natalia knew:

what a ballet dancer should look like. It’s not like my body shape. ... I know that my body is still only this big [referring to stature] and doesn’t look long and beautiful [breaks into roaring laughter]. Anyway, body shape, it does ... it does ... it’s quite disappointing [sadness in her voice].

Firebird and Abigail also made a distinction between themselves and real dancers. Abigail felt that real ballet dancers have “a little bit less shape. ... I’m hourglass ... they are shapeless.” Firebird knew that she “was a fit young woman ... I was already seeing myself [in the mirrors] and looking at pictures of myself and seeing that I didn’t fit into the image [of a ballet dancer].” Firebird reflected on the implicit messages her teacher gave her about her body as a child. Firebird knew that “the dance teacher was fine ... I wouldn’t say that she was negative in any particular way, but [the teacher] did have a younger sister in the class who fitted the [dancer] image more.”

5.7.2 Seeing oneself in the mirror elicited mixed emotional responses

All participants talked about their experiences of the studio mirrors. Liza, Alice, Natalia, Firebird, and Jane reported using the studio mirrors to check and correct their body line, to look at their body shape, and to look at others. Liza noted that some dancers prefer to dance without mirrors. Liza, however, liked the mirrors as they helped her “visualise corrections and get the right feeling in my body.” Liza stressed that she needs “those

visual cues to get the angles right. It is sometimes hard to tell.” Alice used the mirror to correct her positioning. Once corrected, Alice tried to memorise “the feeling [of a movement or position].” For Alice, this was “like writing a shopping list ... I think the same of the mirror. Once you have seen yourself [in a position] and know how it feels different ... you can retain it.” Natalia used the mirrors “to check my position and line”. However, she generally avoided using the mirrors as they were “disconcerting ... I don’t mind it to check my position and line ... but I find it disorientating when I’m dancing.”

The dancers reported that the expressions on their faces reflected in the studio mirrors were different to how they actually felt while dancing. When Firebird looked in the mirror, she saw herself “either concentrating or smiling if I’ve figured out or got it sorted and know what I’m doing [laughs loudly].” Alice described herself as

quite a smiley person [laughs]. If the class is hard work and I’m really concentrating, I look in the mirror and think why am I not smiling? [Laughs.] ... Oh, I know, I’m concentrating really hard and enjoying this [laughs loudly].

When Jane looked in the mirror she saw “concentration. I see a serious, quite a serious look. I don’t see happy, smiley, relaxing, grinny, and all that sort of thing. I see quite a lot of concentration, like I am thinking about things too much.” For Abigail, the mirrors affirmed her identity as a ballet body.

Liza observed that what she feels and what she sees in the mirrors usually match. For Liza, “if a movement or position feels horrific and clunky, it usually looks horrific and clunky.” Liza added that what she sees when she is dancing and her image in the class video recordings are often very different. Liza was sure she “jumped a metre off the ground ... I’m lucky to have been two centimetres off the ground.” For Abigail the mirrors

confirmed who she feels she truly is. Abigail saw herself “looking like a ballet dancer ... I am a ballet dancer and probably more than I thought before.”

5.7.3 Seeing one’s own maturing body in the mirrors

The reflections of Natalia, Firebird, Abigail, and Jane revealed that maturing dancers have mixed feelings when seeing themselves in the studio mirrors. Natalia stated that she felt that “the mirrors in the studio are ... flattering. I think I wish I looked like that but I don’t.” For Natalia, the mirrors brought up uncomfortable feelings about her body. She did not “want to look like that to dance”. However, when Natalia entered the studio she forgot “about that because we look like that [emphasis] anyway, so what the heck. You know, it’s a bit different if you’re working with the young 20-year-olds.” Firebird expressed a similar sentiment. Firebird admitted looking in the mirrors and thinking, “Wouldn’t it be nice to be a bit slimmer, that skirt would look a bit better on me.” However, Firebird reminded herself that “what we are actually looking at is not real.” Firebird decided to ignore the mirrors “because I’m learning ballet for myself. I’m trying to teach others that it’s not about how it looks, it’s about how it feels.” Liza was not concerned about her reflection in the mirrors. Sometimes Liza saw “a roll of fat coming over the back of [her] leotard.” She knew that it was the result of “wearing a bra that’s too tight.” When Liza saw a roll she told herself “to pull up and I stand a little differently.” Jane confessed that at home she did not have “mirrors that I can see. I’ve got a couple, but they’re behind doors. So I don’t see myself.” Jane was shocked when she saw herself in the studio mirrors. Jane looked at herself “in the mirror front on and I look ok ... but I look from the side and think is that me? Am I really, really that fat?” Jane observed that she was “always surprised to see how fat I am. I don’t actually feel it in my head and I don’t see it ... the mirrors are shocking things, but I don’t feel that they are cruel.”

Sometimes the image in the mirrors did not reflect the lines and movements the dancer thought they were making. Abigail felt that “it’s not nice if you feel the movement and you look at it in the mirror and it’s not the same.” For Abigail, movements not only have to feel “ballet right”, they also need to look “ballet right.” The mirrors provided feedback. Jane used “the mirror as a reference, and I look at the shape that I see in the mirror ... I look to see if my arm is correctly positioned. That’s all. It’s just a reference.”

5.7.4 Real dancers are youthful and beautiful

The tension between the desired youthful ballet body and the reality of being a maturing adult body were threaded throughout the participants’ stories. The perceived imperfections of their bodies were discussed in detail. Weight and appearance were a significant focus. Some dancers accepted their maturing bodies with humour. For others their bodies were a source of personal shame and failure.

Abigail recounted a time in class when she looked in the mirrors and noticed that she had “a roll [of body fat]. What’s that doing there? [Laughs.]” Abigail’s body “felt different” and the experience made her uneasy. Abigail wondered if she could “just not bake or not eat quite as much ... maybe that roll might disappear and I would feel better.” Abigail suggested that weight is not a “number on the scale ... it’s about the feeling not necessarily the look. It doesn’t feel right.”

Natalia did not like seeing “the rolls that come between the ribs and the waist [giggling with embarrassment, followed by loud roaring laughter]. The sideways view!” Natalia stated that she is “very conscious of my body shape ... ballet dancers don’t look like this”. People have told Natalia that they enjoyed her dancing. Natalia wondered why this was when she herself feels:

that I am not beautiful [emphasis] enough ... my body is not gorgeous [emphasis] enough because that's what ballet is about. You have got to be beautiful. You've got to have long limbs, beautiful feet, the right shaped head, the high cheekbones [roaring laughter] ... I think well, I don't have any of that. So how can ... how can it [Natalia's dancing] be beautiful?

Alice admitted to being "very conscious of getting old." She suggested that "we all wish we were younger, fitter, slimmer, more beautiful, or we were born with curly hair, straight hair, or smaller feet, larger hands." Maturing dancers "have got so little time left" and when "you have got to our age there is actually very little you can change about it anyway [breaks out into roaring laughter]." Alice commented that "we've got the bodies that God gave us. Enjoy the nice parts I say."

5.7.5 Real dancers wear leotards, skirts and tights

All dancers commented on the difficulties they experienced finding dancewear suitable for their maturing bodies. Commercially available leotards were designed for children and adults of a certain size. Dancers sometimes found that the designs were inappropriate for maturing adult bodies. These experiences served to reinforce the messages that ballet is for youthful bodies only.

Jane chose not to wear a leotard or tights to class. She could not find dancewear that fitted her well. She felt "like an imposter" and was "physically uncomfortable" when wearing "leotards and tights." Jane found that she was "always pulling down the front, pulling this, spilling out here." Instead, Jane attended class in her activewear. Firebird found that it was "almost impossible to buy a leotard that fits and supports adult bodies. They are designed for teenagers with no chests". She expressed frustration at having "to wear something underneath the [leotard] I wanted. It ... has longer sleeves to cover my body bits [laughs awkwardly] and it's not cut too high on the hip." Liza felt that "good

dancewear is really important ... people want to look nice, look pretty, look like dancers and feel nice in their skin. Properly fitting gear helps with confidence. If you look like a dancer, you will be more confident.”

Revealing leotards intensified feelings of self-consciousness and anxiety. Dancers felt a lack of control over their bodies and an inability to conceal the realities of ageing from the public gaze. Abigail, Natalia, Alice, and Jane felt that leotards, short skirts, and tights increased the visibility of the body and their feelings of self-consciousness. For Abigail, wearing a leotard was “an appalling thing to do”. She felt uncomfortable and “completely frumpy”. Natalia did not “like getting into these little [ballet] skirts. ... I’ve made a skirt that’s longer so I’m happier in that ... I don’t wear a leotard. I wear something loose.” Alice liked “to feel I’m well supported. I’m always conscious of my fat tummy and big bottom so I like to be slimmed down as much as I can.” She found, however, that leotards were “never big enough” and wished that dancewear manufacturers would “accommodate the fuller figure [laughter].” Jane felt like she was “in drag when I have to get into those damn costumes. That stupid skirt that I wouldn’t wear in real life. I’ve got no waist, so I don’t wear skirts like that.”

Leotards, skirts, and tights are the clothing commonly worn by professional dancers in the studio. Wearing the same clothing helped the participants fit in and made them feel like real dancers. Wearing a leotard and skirt also identified a dancer as a serious recreational student. Abigail reflected on this and noted that “I want to go [to buy dancewear] ... if I can go seriously.” Alice was adamant that “if you wear track pants and a t-shirt, I don’t think you feel as if you’re dancing.” Firebird noted that “you feel more like a dancer if you actually wear the clothes that dancers wear.” She felt that wearing appropriate dancewear was a mark of “respect” for ballet traditions.

Activewear often identified someone as a new beginner or inexperienced dancer. New dancers gradually adopted aspects of ballet costume through active encouragement from classmates or a desire to fit in. Alice noticed that, after a few weeks, new dancers in her class moved from activewear to “wearing ballet leggings, a skirt or leotard.” Alice observed that they fitted in better when they wore the correct clothing.

Dancers talked about the feeling of excitement and anticipation when they put on their dancewear. Abigail became “excited, so excited, thinking, ohhh, this is really cool. It’s like going out to play. This is me, this is really me, this is who I am.” There was a ritual aspect to putting on dancewear. For Liza it was “like putting on makeup before I go to work. It’s the game face. Not in a bitchy kind of way. I find the ritual helps.” Alice liked to wear her hair in a bun and put “a flower in it. That’s my ballet statement!”

Getting dressed in their ballet clothing made some dancers change their posture and the way they moved. Firebird recollected walking “taller. I start smiling. Yes, I definitely try to walk taller.” Alice’s posture changed and she “pulls up”. Liza felt that wearing dancewear in the studio made her “focus on the aesthetics ... because ballet is ultimately an aesthetic sport.” Liza recalled that she stood “a bit better, less slumpy. You are a bit more focused on finding your core.”

5.7.6 Performing as giving pleasure to others

Performing on the stage is the display of the ballet body and dancing skills. Natalia, Firebird, Jane, and Abigail spoke of the satisfaction they felt when dancing in front of an audience. The giving of pleasure to their audience was a key theme in their accounts. In turn the people in the audiences responded to the dancers. Their feedback inspired the dancers to continue on their dancing journeys.

When performing in front of others, Natalia felt encouraged “to give everything I’ve got” to her audience. Firebird found that “performing [in the school shows] unleashed this person that seems to want to dance jazz [squeals with surprise and enthusiasm].” Firebird said that she is “not really like that ... but there is a tiny little bit of a performer in there. She’s just started to be unleashed. Lord knows what the world is going to see next honestly! [Laughs.]”

Jane observed that “the friends and family who come to watch us are incredibly generous with their positive reactions.” Jane felt that the people in the audience were “not looking for physical perfection from us ... they’re looking for attitude and courage as much as anything else.” This sentiment was reinforced by one of Jane’s friends. He noted that she may not have the stereotypical ballet physique “but you haven’t given up yet.”

The participants felt that performances were meant to be spectacles designed to surprise the audience. Firebird recollected “a wonderful magical moment” in a show. A dancer in her “70s ... pirouetted ... and the audience erupted with excitement.” Firebird loved the “surprise she gave everyone. We knew she could do that. It was just lovely, just lovely.”

The giving of pleasure was important for some dancers. Firebird’s friends commented that they “could see us enjoying dancing and sharing our joy with the audience.” Abigail reflected on her ballroom dancing days. She recalled that onlookers often commented on how much they enjoyed watching her and her partner performing.

5.7.7 Challenging the stereotypes of ballet body and who can dance

Alice, Firebird, Abigail, and Jane spoke about the public perception that ballet was a recreational activity for young people only. When Alice tells people that:

I do adult ballet, they reply “Oh, so you say you teach?” They presume that because you’re an adult you teach younger people to dance. No. I joke and say to be a senior dancer you need to be over 50, overweight and have at least one dodgy body part and most are qualified on all three counts [roaring laughter].

Firebird spoke about the importance of challenging the stereotype of the ballerina by putting maturing dancing bodies on stage. Professional ballerinas usually retire by 40 years old. Firebird felt that:

once you are over 35 to 40 years old, society looks at you and says that you are not a ballerina. You really don’t fit on the stage. But ballet is an art form that has a huge, long history and we [adult dancers] are part of it. We need to be showing ourselves performing ballet. People’s attitudes need to be changed.

Abigail and Firebird talked about challenging the stereotypes of the ballet body. Abigail felt that “a lot of people think that to be a ballerina you have to be ... sedate, calm, of a certain type.” Abigail was adamant that “you don’t have to be some sylph-like, ethereal thing. You can just be a normal person and do ballet.”

Firebird used to be “shy about telling people I was doing ballet ... now I make a thing of it.” Firebird was no longer concerned if “they look at me and go, ‘Oh, she doesn’t seem to have the right kind of body.’” Firebird was determined that the young men and women in her family “need to be able to see a [maturing] body going through space gracefully with joy, with music in their heart.” Firebird added that “you can watch men and women do another sport like running. People are fine with that ... but, somehow, with ballet it’s like ... you shouldn’t be doing that. ... I think I want to change that.”

Seeing women dancing in the popular media prompted Firebird and Alice to think more about their motivations for dance and challenging common perceptions of who can be a dancer. Firebird reflected on a video she saw of a maturing dancer with Alzheimer's performing the arm movements from Giselle. Firebird recalled that the dancer "was inspirational for many of us". The video reinforced Firebird's beliefs that ballet is "not about what you look like, it's about how it feels ... and she was expressing how she felt" and "what she remembered".

Alice reflected on the television advertisements for Ryman retirement villages which featured a maturing ballet dancer and a hip hop dancer. Alice found "it very interesting [excited] that they have done that. Now where did they get that idea from? ... I think we need to see more older people on TV. I think we should see much more diversity in adverts." Alice noted that those advertisements were great ways of raising awareness of dance as a recreational activity for maturing adults.

Jane suggested that challenging the stereotypes around ballet and who can dance ballet requires women to "improve our own sense of self-esteem" and to speak out. She felt strongly that women need to remember that "they've got something valuable to offer [society]." Jane stressed that "younger people need to stop long enough to notice us" and recognise that maturing adults "don't have to be high performance athletes". Jane asked rhetorically "Is anybody going to expect Valerie Adams to be throwing the shotput like she does now when she's 55 or 75? No, she is a magnificent, strong, accomplished athlete." Jane felt that maturing women "can still learn ballet and it doesn't mean lowering the standards. We really have to improve our own sense of self-esteem. We really need to speak out about stereotypes."

5.7.8 Summary

The tensions between the youthful ballet body idolised in western society and the realities of being maturing women were threaded throughout the dancers' stories. These stereotypes of who is a ballet body and who can be a dancer were reinforced by the dance industry and often encountered when speaking to friends and family. All dancers struggled, to varying degrees, to come to terms with the images of themselves reflected in the studio mirrors. Through strength of character, perseverance, and the love of dance, each woman claimed and reaffirmed her right to be a ballet dancer.

5.8 Theme 5: Teachers through the eyes of maturing dancers

The participants' reflections reveal that teachers played a significant role in their development as dancers. Adult returners had negative and positive memories of childhood teachers. Those memories influenced the expectations they had of their teachers. The maturing dancers had clear opinions about the characteristics that make an effective ballet teacher. Dancers wanted teachers who understood how to teach adults, had knowledge of the maturing body, and were skilled communicators. This model of the ideal teacher differed from their experiences of teachers during childhood.

5.8.1 Negative experiences of teachers

Abigail and Alice recalled negative experiences that influenced their beliefs about what good teachers know and do. Abigail's childhood teacher was "completely chaotic ... slap dash ... she would fly into class and let her child crawl around on the floor." For Abigail, a good teacher "runs everything like clockwork". This teacher did not correctly prepare her students for exams and competitions. Abigail recalled her class entering a competition which they were unprepared for and could not win. Abigail looked "back in horror ... we must have looked ridiculous because they [other competitors] were all top

dancers in this competition. People like Douglas Wright ... when I look back on it, I am mortified.”

Maturing dancers were very aware that they had different goals, safety concerns, and physical needs to children and young adults. Alice tried an adult ballet class at another school. She found it “enjoyable, but wasn’t getting the push” she wanted. When Alice enquired about classes for maturing adults, she “was told no, we push everybody along at their own speed.” Alice was disappointed and returned to her usual school where the needs of maturing adults were understood and well catered for.

5.8.2 The beliefs and behaviours of good ballet teachers

Jane, Natalia, and Abigail felt that good teachers wanted to teach adults. They created positive studio experiences that kept the dancers returning to class. Jane recalled that she and her classmates could not:

believe we were allowed in a ballet studio, and that somebody is willing to take the time to teach us. The teachers are standing there, not finding it ludicrous and thinking it fantastic that we are actually willing to have a go. I love that in the teachers.

Natalia recalled that one of her teachers had:

a charisma that you just can’t name. You can’t find it anywhere else. I don’t know what it is. It’s a personality thing. It’s the way she conveys her teaching ... [she] has a natural charisma. It’s so inspiring, and her choreography is inspiring. She’s encouraging.

Abigail felt that:

if the teacher is not enjoying teaching, then it’s just a chore. They are never going to be a good teacher. You gotta actually want to teach and enjoy teaching adults. If you don’t, it will come through in your teaching. ... If you want to just have young ballerinas, then you shouldn’t be teaching maturing adults.

Natalia, Jane, and Firebird thought that good teachers need to have knowledge of the maturing adult body. Natalia suggested that teachers need to include warm-up exercises in class and encourage self-care practices outside of class. This demonstrates an awareness of the needs of adult bodies. Keeping the maturing body in focus when planning classwork and choreography was very much appreciated by dancers. Jane admired:

what the teacher did [with a dance] ... she's taking into account the fact that we are stiff and sore and off-balance and all that sort of thing. So there's a lot of walk, walk, walk, stop, slowly turn around, walk, walk, walk and stop again. No leaps. Obviously we don't do any of that.

Firebird recalled her teacher's quick response when she was injured during class.

Firebird was amazed that:

there was so much advice around for me. The teacher told me exactly what to do and not do ... he is an expert dancer and knew what to do. Other dancers from the company were contacting me saying do this, do that. I felt so very supported and cared for ... the injury didn't put me off at all, because I learnt more about what I need to do.

Firebird observed that good teachers should be able to teach adults of all ages and abilities. Firebird's first serious adult ballet class contained beginner and returning dancers aged from 20 to 80 years old. Firebird's teacher "managed to teach all of us absolutely seamlessly, you know with all those different [abilities] and you just had to make sure you were already warmed up. It was very good."

Abigail felt that good teachers are energetic and demonstrate movements, and that teachers should be able to "keep pace with their students. They should be able to explain something and demonstrate it a couple of times before letting the class go off and try it. I think clarity and pace really matter."

Corrections given during class were identified by all dancers as being an essential and desirable part of the ballet learning process. Firebird and Natalia considered that good teachers gave corrections and constructive feedback that the dancer could understand and apply. Firebird appreciated the explanations that came with the teacher's corrections. Firebird's teacher was "very good at explaining why you wouldn't take that particular position because your hips will rise and you will change the line." Natalia felt that good teachers have expectations of their students. Natalia recalled that "they don't settle for, oh well, you are just an old lady trying to do ballet. They don't settle for that at all." Alice, Firebird, and Jane welcomed receiving corrections from their teachers. Jane viewed corrections as a sign that her teacher cared and "has faith that I can improve. That trust and faith is very inspiring. I want to do better when she corrects me." Jane felt "absolute gratitude and excitement" when she received feedback on her dancing.

The relationship between teachers and adult students was professional and personal. Teachers observed adult dancers and saw them in ways that their classmates and family did not. Abigail recalled a time when she was suffering from depression. Her teacher's kindness and compassion helped her get through:

[I] was still doing lessons at a very sad time in my life and actually the only person who ... oh, dear ...this is going to make me cry [tears begin rolling down Abigail's face] ... the only person who noticed was my dance teacher [crying] ... for him to notice that I was struggling at that time ... I probably didn't know that I was suffering from depression. I probably didn't know that ... but he knew ... I kept going there because I loved to dance ... dance helped me through.

Natalia and Alice believed that good teachers were patient and understanding. Natalia recalled that her teacher's "corrections were done in a gentle manner. You didn't feel, 'Oh my gosh, I can't do this. I want to get out of here [roaring laughter].' No, you felt encouraged and accepted for where you were at [laughter]."

Alice felt that her teachers were “very patient, extremely patient [emphasis].” Alice reflected on this and noted that “it must be so frustrating seeing these older ladies perhaps struggling to remember, take it in, and to perform. I think that must be really hard for them.” Alice recalled that “when we curtsy and thank them at the end of class, to me that is never enough. I feel we should really give them a hug and say thank you so much for being so patient [chuckles].”

Firebird considered that good teachers knew how to match the music to the movements taught in class. Firebird’s teacher was “particularly good at fitting the music with what you are actually doing. She knows really well that this music will suit this and that will suit that.”

5.8.3 How do maturing teachers see their students?

Jane, Natalia, Liza, and Alice admitted to occasionally wondering how maturing ballet learners were perceived by their teachers. Jane thought about this and asked her teacher “how she copes with having to teach older adults.” Jane was surprised to hear that her teacher thought that having a diverse range of maturing adults in her class was “cool.” Natalia also “often wondered about that” and felt that her teacher “sees us as she might see her mother ... she learns a lot from us about certain things not related to dance.”

Liza believed that her teachers:

probably think we are all a little bit mad ... but they are teachers, and also adults and adult dancers like us ... they’re all going through that same ageing process as the rest of us. I don’t think we are viewed negatively ... we are definitely viewed differently from children. We come under our own steam. We are here because we want to learn, not because mum has forced us to be here and to live her dreams out through us.

Alice and Liza also pondered on how their teachers felt about their own experiences of ageing and being maturing dancers. Alice reflected on this and noted that “when you’re in your 30s and 40s you never think about being in your 70s and 80s. Then, all of a sudden, you are here.”

Liza was also curious about how teachers felt about growing older. Liza hoped that teaching maturing adults may help them “feel good about ageing.” For Liza, working with maturing learners may offer glimpses of an alternative future in which “there is hope [roaring laughter] ... life ... willingness” and where “you don’t have to give everything up because you are getting older.” Liza remarked that maturing dancers may show teachers that “it is important to do things and ... make connections outside of home or work because eventually those things change one way or another.”

5.8.4 Summary

The dancers had very clear opinions of how they expected adult ballet teachers to behave and communicate. The traditional authoritarian pedagogies were absent from the descriptions of desired teaching practices. Instead, maturing dancers preferred more democratic and communicative teaching methods. In the dancers’ reflections, teachers were positioned as mentors and partners in learning. Teachers were seen as living repositories of ballet history and knowledge. As such, teachers were treated with respect, highly valued, and often treasured by their maturing dancers.

5.9 Theme 6: Recreational ballet facilitates experiences of wellbeing

The dancers’ accounts revealed that participation in recreational ballet was beneficial for physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Their stories revealed that these benefits

were gained through deep engagement with and commitment to learning and embodying the physical and social practices of ballet.

5.9.1 Reflections on the benefits of dancing to health and wellbeing

All dancers reflected on the overall benefits they gained from participating in recreational ballet as maturing adults. For Natalia, “ballet does give me a sense of wellbeing. I absolutely love waking up to ballet days.” Other activities such as painting did not give Natalia “the same emotional experience” as dancing. Abigail enjoyed the “mindfulness ... being present and focused” that dancing brings. For Firebird, ballet was “a whole-body exercise. ... It’s good for your body, mind and brain.” Abigail felt that ballet was “really good for your brain. I was thinking about ballet for older people. Wow, there are so many benefits. There is relaxation, expression and getting your body to move the way that you want it to move.”

Thanks to ballet, Alice was “much more conscious of sitting in a chair, sitting upright, sitting properly, holding myself up. I’m much more aware when I’m driving. I used to slouch at the wheel. I do not [emphasis] slouch at the wheel now.”

For Liza, the decision to return to dance “led to my weight loss ... I made the connection that actually I was punishing myself ... trying to plug an emotional hole with food. Once I got rid of that, here we are!”

Jane felt “a sense of wonderment” when she went walking and her knees no longer hurt.

Jane remarked that she has:

stronger legs ... that gives me the feeling that I can still improve and feel even better. It’s set me off on a wonderful quest about all things physical and to do with breathing, yoga, and mindfulness. There is still the possibility of improvement and that I haven’t finished maturing. [laughter]. I’m still middle-aged in some funny ways. I’m also proud of

myself that I give this stuff a go ... even if I can't be perfect at it, I still give it a go. That gives me a good feeling. I'm excited about what still lies ahead.

Each participant's story revealed that the benefits they experienced were the direct result of a conscious decision to explore and engage with ballet as a social and physical practice. By investing time and energy in learning ballet, the participants discovered a pathway to emotional wellbeing.

5.9.2 Deep engagement with dance facilitates emotional wellbeing

All dancers mentioned experiencing feelings of emotional wellbeing and happiness resulting from absorption and intense engagement while dancing. The participants claimed that these feelings while dancing were different to those experienced during other physical activity. Abigail recalled that swimming, kayaking, and being in the outdoors give her feelings of "achievement", "exhilaration", a "sense of nature and wonder" from being "one" with nature. These activities, however, lack the ability to express oneself that comes with dancing.

A sense of wellbeing was associated with mastery of movement and expression. For Abigail, this happened in "being one with yourself and focusing on the music and how it all works together." These moments felt "satisfying, comforting. It's real ... you're not trying to be anything else. You are just who you are. You have a smile on your face."

Natalia reflected on the feelings of happiness, satisfaction, and wellbeing that she experienced "the minute we start dancing". These moments were "absolutely beautiful. Regardless of what it might look like [laughing]. It feels beautiful." These experiences led Natalia to feel that she could "dance until I die ... until I can't ... until I can't. I would dance every day if I could."

Firebird noticed that the joy she was feeling while dancing was reflected on her face. She observed that “If I’m not smiling on the outside, I am absolutely grinning on the inside.” Firebird expressed that dancing brings her into a place of “complete happiness ... it’s absolutely beautiful ... the feeling of peace that descends on you in a ballet studio, it’s unlike anything else I’ve ever experienced. ... It’s just completely centred.”

For Jane these moments were experienced “very occasionally” and felt “wonderful ... surprisingly expressive ... lovely and relaxing.” During these times Jane felt “as though the dance is coming out of me rather than me manually directing all the bits of my body.” She recalled losing “concentration because I’m doing the right things automatically.” Jane felt a deep sense of satisfaction from “being able to just allow yourself to enjoy it.”

Alice and Liza revealed that the feelings of wellbeing while dancing were accompanied by a sense of freedom from the physical realities of being maturing bodies. Alice remarked that while dancing she sometimes felt “like I am being transported [emphasis] ... It feels very good [emphasis] ... it’s a feeling of lightness ... of beauty. It’s a feeling that you’ve actually got the perfect body [roaring laughter].” While these experiences did not “happen very often” for Alice, she welcomed them as the “pain and anxiety all seem to melt away.” Liza reported having similar experiences. While dancing, she did not “feel any physical pain” until she got home, and then she felt “very sore at night and the next morning”. Liza reflected that the sensations of joy and being pain free may result from having entered “a meditative state” while “dancing and listening to the music.”

Firebird noticed that the sense of wellbeing generated while dancing is also “very much a group experience”. She recalled times when “we do an exercise ... we have just moved and then there is spontaneous applause at the end ... that’s how we all feel. You think, ‘Oh my god, that was beautiful! Can we do it again?’ [Happy laughter].”

5.9.3 A sense of community facilitates health and wellbeing

Surprisingly few dancers explicitly addressed the social aspects of learning ballet as an adult. They talked about watching each other, dancing with each other, being outside the studio with each other, but rarely did they discuss the social relationships that help facilitate the embodiment of the ballet dancer identity and the creation of shared communities of practice. Despite this, it was clear from the accounts that social relationships between dancers are important. These relationships are the glue that creates spaces where it is safe and acceptable for maturing adults to be ballet dancers.

Alice and Liza observed that good schools for adults encouraged socialisation and fostered a sense of community. The social atmosphere was important for all dancers in this project. A sense of connection made learning easier and helped create networks outside of the home and work. Alice and Liza spoke in detail about the importance of the social aspect of learning ballet in the studio. Alice felt that a good school is “a home away from home.” Alice viewed:

the ballet studio as my second family now because when you retire people die [emphasis], people move away, people change, people leave their husbands, and you never see them again [a little upset]. You know [clears her throat, brief pause] ... [at the studio] you get to know new people and make new friends. ... I've got new friends ... which is nice ... especially at our age because so many people have died [softly laughs].

Liza suggested that dancing at home is not the same as in the studio. For Liza “it doesn't feel the same ... as doing class in the studio. It's nothing to do with the floor, it's nothing to do with anything. It's just that environment is very different.”

Alice felt that creating the right atmosphere is “all about the welcome.” Alice took classes at another school but the connection with the dancers was not there. Alice found

that “people were friendly to me, but nobody actually introduced themselves ... we should be encouraging each other. How can we do that if we don’t know each other’s names? I never found out some of their names.”

The class atmosphere made a difference to the learning experience. For Liza, a great class was one where people enjoyed themselves. Liza felt that “you are not just dancing for yourself, you are dancing with other people. You are having a bit of a laugh, it’s social and also serious.” Part of the social etiquette in the studio was knowing when to be social and “when to listen and do your thing”. For Liza, learning in a group was not “just about the dance, it’s also about social connection with other people ... when you all get on the vibe is good.”

For Liza, a class with a poor social atmosphere was the exact opposite. The negative vibe “drags you down. It’s like dancing in treacle. It sort of flattens out everything ... everything seems to take longer ... you are dragging your arse through the day.”

While dancing in a sociable environment was beneficial, the participants also expressed a need for space and privacy. Jane felt that “ballet is good socially ... but I don’t actually need more friends. I like dancing with the same companionable people, but I won’t make an effort to see them outside class ... they are there and that’s fine.”

The dancers’ accounts revealed that the adult ballet studio was both a classroom and a social space. The studio setting reaffirmed the participants’ dancer identities. The studio also provided a gathering place where participants met and socialised with others who shared a common interest in dance.

5.9.4 Summary

Ballet was a highly valued activity at the centre of the maturing dancers' lives. Not only did dance provide them with exercise, it also offered them a set of tools for coping with health issues, difficult personal situations, and loneliness. Participation in dance provided a means of building resilience and skills for negotiating the physical and social changes that come with maturing. For both beginner and returning dancers, this sense of wellbeing was enhanced by being part of a community of practice. These experiences of joy and wellbeing reinforced their dancer identities and sense of belonging in ballet.

5.10 Theme 7: Dancing futures

The dancers in this project were aware that as maturing adults they are highly visible within their ballet communities. Most spoke to the need for the dance industry and the public to change their attitudes to maturing bodies and the provision of adult ballet classes. Some participants felt a responsibility to raise awareness of the benefits of ballet for maturing adults. Others felt that the stereotypes of ballet as a youthful activity needed to be challenged and overturned through participation. Most spoke of their desire to continue dancing for as long as they were physically able.

5.10.1 My legacy

Jane was mindful that the maturing adults in the studio may be role models for younger dancers. Jane stated that she did not "want them looking at us thinking we are a crock of old shit who can't straighten our legs or kick very high or anything like that." Jane wanted "them to see people who are still looking forward, still looking ahead, still wanting to improve and enjoying what they are doing."

Jane felt that if recreational dancers knew more about maturing professionals and their contribution to ballet, they may realise that there is a place and role for adult women in dance. Jane contemplated researching the history of female ballet dancers who danced into maturity. She wanted to “know who they are, how they kept dancing, and what they think about it. They are my whakapapa [heritage] in terms of this ballet enterprise.”

Liza hoped her legacy will be “a general sense of hilarity [roaring laughter]”. Like Jane, Liza believed that she has a responsibility to be a good role model for younger dancers. While waiting for her daughter’s dance classes to finish, Liza often practiced in an empty studio. She hoped “that young people can look at me as an adult dancer and see that even if you don’t dance as a career, it doesn’t mean you have to stop dancing.” Liza observed that young dancers finish their “exams and if they don’t want to do it as a job, well, what happens next? They stop dancing and that’s a huge shame.” Liza reflected that “there is no equivalent in sport ... women can continue playing rugby or netball. We [dancers] can’t do that. When you have finished your training and if you’re not going to do it as a career, well then what?” Liza stressed that “recreational dance and dancers have a huge part to play in the continuation of dance.”

Alice was a strong and vocal advocate for adult ballet. Alice felt “quite proud of that. I joined adult ballet and am now waving a flag for other people to do it.” She hoped “that somebody sees this 70-something-year-old still dancing and thinks that they would also like to have a go [giggling].” Alice felt that “a lot of people make excuses. I’m the sort of person who says let’s have a go. ... It may not be perfect, but it could and should be fun [shouting and roaring laughter].”

5.10.2 Dancing futures: Dreams and possibilities

Natalia, Abigail, Firebird, Alice, and Liza spoke of their passion for dance and desire to keep dancing for as long as they were physically able. Natalia stated with determination that “I will dance until I die ... until I can’t ... until I can’t. I would dance every day if I could.” Abigail was resolute that she wanted to “keep doing ballet forever and ever.” Firebird was adamant that ballet would remain “in the middle [of her life], in the same place it is at the moment [laughs loudly].”

Alice did not want to “give up ballet ... I want to carry on [softly]. I want to do as many classes as I can. I want to carry on [softly].” Alice had contemplated the possibility of not being able to dance. She decided that “If I couldn’t dance, I would probably do some steps and stretches at home to keep fit and active.” Alice “would enjoy watching dancing and listening to dance music. My enjoyment of the art would not go away. It wouldn’t disappear. It would just lay dormant.”

Abigail and Liza had thought about the possibilities of training as teachers of adult ballet. Abigail was interested “in teaching ballet to beginner adults. That would be super cool ... I would love to do that. I’ve never taught anyone to do anything, but I would love to teach ballet.” Liza had seriously contemplated sitting the intermediate ballet exam. Liza stated that she was “down to do the vocational levels for real. I’ve been toying with doing them and hopefully being able to get to a point where I’m allowed to teach.” Liza believed that “people who have come through [ballet training] as adults and are willing to pass on that knowledge are coming from a totally different perspective than someone who has been a professional dancer.” Liza was adamant that maturing dancers “have been through the process and know what it takes to become an adult ballet dancer. That matters.”

5.10.3 Messages for change

Jane, Alice, Firebird, and Liza offered advice to other adults interested in learning ballet and some messages for dance teachers and the dance industry. These messages focused on the need for professional dance to change its attitudes towards maturing adults.

Jane urged maturing adults to look beyond the narrow stereotype of the professional ballet dancer. She was adamant that “you can surprise yourself. You cannot afford to believe in the stereotype about who can dance ballet.” Jane encouraged people to “recognise the stereotype for what it is: a stereotype.” She noted that “there are extremely good reasons neurologically, physically, emotionally, and mentally for carrying on with ballet. There’s a huge amount to be gained from it.”

Alice advised interested adults to “take up ballet or come back ... ballet has everything we need to sustain us mentally and physically. ... I think our teachers and the dance industry should be encouraging us to continue dancing.”

Firebird suggested that adults “get in there ... and see how it feels”. She felt “it would be sad to think that there are probably people out there who would love to do ballet and just haven’t tried it yet.” Firebird cautioned interested adults not to think of ballet as a gym session “it is an exercise class, and you may be absolutely exhausted at the end but it’s not about that.” Firebird stressed that “dance is about the body and soul. Soul even more than the body really.”

Liza had a message for teachers and the dance industry. Liza wanted them to remember that adults have value and deserve respect. Liza recalled that a teacher once told her:

that adults are not going to do anything with ballet training so why bother teaching them ... that comment was very dismissive and completely disrespectful. I’ll never be a professional dancer. But I can

certainly aspire to the same level of technique as a professional dancer. I do something with ballet. I use it for social connection. I use it for meditative experiences. Sometimes it's a bit of an emotional release. Sometimes it's a mental workout or it's a check out from my day. I can go to dance and leave my box of issues in the car. There's the social connections and the continuing to learn and there's all of that stuff. All of those things are doing something with ballet and it's also contributing to the longevity of the performing art and ballet culture.

5.10.4 Summary

For these dancers, a life without dance would be a life less rich. Through participating in adult recreational ballet, they actively challenge the stereotypes of who can be a ballet dancer. By speaking up about their experiences of exclusion and the joys that dance brings, these women made space for maturing bodies in ballet. They are role models for adults who wish to dance and for the young people who will be tomorrow's maturing dancers.

5.11 Chapter summary

This study used a methodology blending perceptual phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, 1964/1968), existential phenomenology (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, 1970/1972) and Goffman's dramaturgical framework (Goffman, 1959, 1963b) to investigate six women's lived experiences of recreational ballet classes and the meanings they attribute to the social and physical practices of dance. Their interview data revealed rich, deeply embodied, and intensely meaningful relationships with ballet practice and others within the social worlds of dance. This data also highlighted the difficulties adults encounter when seeking ballet education opportunities and the negative impacts that ageism and social stereotypes about the ballet body have on the wellbeing of maturing recreational dancers. In Chapter Six, "Discussion", key themes in

these women's reflections on dancing while maturing are explored and interpreted with the help of the writings of the three theorists and the literature.

Chapter 6 Discussion

The people whose old age is most favoured are those whose interests are many-sided. (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 504)

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological research study was to investigate the lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes. The aim was to listen, interpret, and find meanings in the women's stories, illuminate the essences at the heart of their relationships with ballet, and uncover how these essences and meanings impacted and shaped their everyday being-in-the-world.

Chapter One outlined the background and rationale for this project. Chapter Two revealed that adult recreational ballet and the voices of maturing dancers are largely absent from the academic and grey literature. Chapter Three detailed the phenomenological and dramaturgical lenses used to view and interpret participant experiences. Chapter Four provided a brief overview of the research design. Chapter Five explored six women's experiences of the recreational ballet phenomenon. These reflections provided glimpses into the deeply ingrained negative stereotypes the dancers encountered when interacting with the world of classical ballet as children and adults, the impacts of these on their personal and social identities, and how dancing while maturing can be a challenging yet positive and enriching experience for women across the lifespan. The participants' voices revealed that their constructions of self and embodiment of the ballet identity were more complex and meaningful than has been previously reported in the literature.

In the present chapter, three key phenomena drawn from the themes in the previous chapter are analysed and interpreted with the help of the literature reviewed in Chapter

Two and the writings of the theorists in Chapter Three. The meanings and significances highlighted by these phenomena are discussed with reference to the overarching question and sub-questions which guided this study:

What are the lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes?

- How does recreational ballet participation contribute to health, wellbeing, and positive ageing for New Zealand women?
- What social and situational factors contribute to the creation of positive and meaningful pedagogical experiences for maturing women who participate in recreational dance?

6.1.1 Three phenomena

During the reading and interpretation of the dancers' transcripts I sensed the presence of three phenomena at play in each woman's relationship with ballet. Most notable of these was an overwhelming sense of pleasure, joy, and freedom embedded in and interwoven into all parts of the warp and weft of the fabric of each woman's flesh world. Hidden in plain sight, these deeply intimate experiences of wellbeing were fragile, treasured, and carefully guarded by the dancers. The accounts were subtle. My transcription notes record that these experiences were recounted in soft voices and whispers, and accompanied by smiles, sometimes tears, and always twinkling eyes. Pleasure was at the heart of each woman's experience of dance. It stimulated continued engagement and social relationships, and was the gateway to joy and freedom. I did not realise the existential significance of these until the penny dropped while re-reading the interview data along with de Beauvoir's writings (1949/1993, 1948/2015, 1970/1972). Once illuminated, the intensity of emotion within each woman's experience of pleasure

and joy saturated and seeped from the pages of their interview transcripts. The depth of feelings and the sense of wellbeing from dancing seemed all the sweeter considering the challenges that each woman faced in her everyday life.

The second phenomenon present in the reflections was the active role the women appeared to play in building intentional communities. These communities of adult dancers seemed to provide protection against the effects of social stereotypes by affirming and normalising maturing being in all its ages and life stages. The women's reflections revealed that the nature and quality of relationships within a community may hinder or foster an individual's sense of belonging, self-worth, and wellbeing. Here the writings of Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002, 1964/1968), Goffman (1959, 1963b) and de Beauvoir (1948/2015) come into their own.

The third phenomenon hidden in the background of the dancers' reflections consisted of the negative and contradictory stereotypes used to construct femininity and ageing. I was struck by how these appeared to be as pervasive, hidden, and subconsciously entrenched in New Zealand society and theatrical dance as they were when de Beauvoir wrote about women in France in the 1940s and maturing adults in the 1970s (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, 1970/1972). These stereotypes appeared to be internalised to varying degrees by all the women in this study.

6.1.2 The arrangement of Chapter Six

In this chapter, the participants' reflections on the phenomena outlined above are merged with the current literature and interpreted to help shed light on the meanings of ballet in the lives of maturing New Zealand women. The discussion is arranged under the following themes:

- Pleasure, joy, and freedom. These are at the heart of recreational ballet practice and maturing dancing being.
- Revealing the pathways to and mechanisms of transcendence and existential freedom through dance. These are glimpses of how maturing dancers and their teachers co-construct the social worlds of adult recreational ballet.
- Raising awareness of the marginalisation of maturing dancers. Adult recreational ballet is resistance and activism against the social stereotypes which render maturing recreational and professional dancers as the invisible other.

6.2 Phenomenon 1: Pleasure, joy and freedom

For the women in this study, a sense of pleasure and joy underpinned all aspects of their experiences of recreational ballet in the schools where they felt at home. Yet the words ‘pleasure’ and ‘joy’ were rarely used by the dancers to describe their feelings about dancing while maturing or its meaning within their lives. The presence of these emotions was seen and felt in the women’s embodied responses during the interviews and sensed in the iterative readings of their transcripts. No single pattern of cause and effect for these affective responses could be identified. Instead, pleasure and joy were intertwined and interwoven into all aspects of their recreational dancing worlds. In a Merleau-Pontian sense, pleasure, and joy were invisible to the casual observer and concealed from direct view by other activities taking place within these worlds (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002, 1964/1968). This invisibility supports the findings of Kolb and Kalogeropoulou (2012) that pleasure and related emotions are marginalised in western society and professional ballet. This, however, is too simple an explanation and

does not reflect the complexities of maturing recreational dancing being. Three common themes were identified within the dancers' experiences of this phenomenon:

- Pleasure and joy are intertwined with the past, present, and future.
- Pleasure and joy are expressed through artistry.
- Pleasure and joy are linked to the acceptance and affirmation of maturing as natural and normal.

In this study, pleasure and joy were most often mentioned by Jane, who began ballet as an adult. For Jane, her love of ballet was “a huge surprise. I never expected it to be the passion that it has become.” The social and physical practice of ballet brought her “unexpected pleasures” (Throsby, 2013, p. 5). This suggests that joy and pleasure are taken-for-granted experiences for adults who danced as children. This claim is supported by Liza who reflected that children follow the teacher's instructions, but adults have a greater capacity for understanding and directing their experiences. This suggests that, for returning dancers, the memories associated with dance during childhood create an expectation that these positive affective states will be accessible to them as adults. This is hinted at in Liza's reflection that if ballet as an adult did not “feel how I remember feeling when I danced [as a child] then at least I had a go”.

From a Merleau-Pontian perspective, Liza's childhood dance activities left a sedimentation or imprint within her habit-body (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). She consciously recruited these muscle memories each time she danced. Liza knew these memories were there. She was unsure if she was physically able to action them. de Beauvoir (1970/1972) stated maturing adults rely heavily on memories of the past when engaging in projects during adulthood. Reflecting on one's past is not childish sentimentality or melancholy. Instead, recalling memories may be seen as an intentional

and meaningful act which grounds an individual in the present and provides them with a firm foundation from which they can launch themselves into the future (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). Like the artists described by Hanna (2013, p. 5), the maturing dancers in this study returned to a creative activity that gave them joy and now brings “comfort and a renewed sense of meaning and purpose”.

This desire to reconnect with positive emotions experienced during childhood reveals that pleasure has a temporal aspect for adult recreational ballet dancers (Krekula, 2022). Pleasure was felt through the intertwining of the present moment with the memories and habit body acquired during childhood (Ferm Almqvist et al., 2023). The interplay between the past and present may be glimpsed in the feelings of self-confidence, self-efficacy, and personal agency underpinning the recollections of Natalia, Alice, Firebird, Abigail, and Liza. For these dancers, the joy of dance emanated from “the pleasure of being actively embodied, living in the sinews, which we gave up when we put away childish things” (Horwell, 2014, p. 166). For all dancers in this study, pleasure and joy did not come from reliving or attempting to recapture their youth. None expressed a desire to return to childhood, to possess “younger age identities” (Krekula, 2022, p. 441) or to become ballet dancers “in order to avoid being old” (Pines & Giles, 2020, p. 89). While pleasure came from improving technique and artistry, no maturing dancer in this study viewed ballet as an “anti-aging method” (Ali-Haapala et al., 2021, p. 1), and progression was not framed negatively as “competing against one’s ageing mind and body” (Ali-Haapala et al., 2021, p. 6). For Firebird in particular, the notion of ballet as competition with self and others was perceived as unpleasurable and demotivating. For the women in this study, pleasure and joy from engagement in creativity were an expression of their

capacity for agency which called each dancer into a meaningful relationship with the present and oriented them towards the future (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, 1964/1968).

6.2.1 Artistry as the expression of pleasure and joy

My dance comes from in here [motions to her heart] but the music comes to me and then the dance comes out of that ... the music affects me here [motions to her heart]. I get quite emotional [laughs].
(Natalia)

Artistry may be defined as the skills used by “dancers [to] ‘create the magic on stage’ for their audience” (H. Kim et al., 2022, p. 436). Natalia’s reflection revealed the value which maturing recreational dancers place on self-expression and artistry in their everyday practice and performances. The ability to express one’s emotions through dance was a strongly desired and sought-after skill for all women in this study. They used artistry to communicate stories to others and to enhance their own experience of pleasure and joy.

In the dancers’ reflections, music and musicality were intimately intertwined with their experiences of artistry. This was not surprising given that dance is a “multidimensional phenomenon” (Ferm Almqvist & Andersson, 2019, p. 5). This aspect of maturing dancing being received more comments than movement literacy. This suggests that the musical aspect of artistry may be particularly meaningful and a primary contributor to the pleasure and joy these dancers experienced. The importance of music in artistry may be found in the way it activates the working memory and limbic system “which in turn modulates and controls many cognitive functions” (Jäncke, 2008, p. 5). This relationship between emotion and memory is glimpsed in the reflections of the maturing dancers in this study. Natalia, Abigail, and Liza’s recollections of their bodily responses to music suggest that, as returners, they possessed a heightened awareness and attunement that

was incorporated into their body-schema as “embodied know-how” during childhood dance classes (Kontos, 2014, p. 114). Natalia’s reflections further suggest that her cognitive and bodily responses to music, muscle memory, and movement are linked. She further noted that “the music affects the movement for me ... the minute they put the music on, my body goes straight into preparation. It just responds immediately.” Similar sentiments about embodied musicality were expressed by Abigail and Liza. Jane, who began ballet as an adult, had a different experience of music while dancing. In her reflections, Jane talked about learning to associate music and ballet steps together during rehearsals but did not speak about her body responding automatically with movement. Jane’s experience of becoming attuned to music while dancing supports the claim made by Bläsing (2015) that a dancer’s somatic musicality develops with more exposure to music and movement together. The reflections of the dancers on their relationship with music suggest that, like dance movements, the memories of music are sedimented into the body and are unconsciously recruited by the body when needed (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002).

No matter where each dancer was in their journey, it was very clear that musicality was a gateway that linked their present to cherished memories of the past. These memories provided them with cultural and emotional capital which they brought into their dancing. This supports Jäncke’s (2008, p. 4) claim that musical memories are “closely involved in forming our view about our own self”. Through dance and artistry, maturing adults “become themselves, or something else other than what is normally expected of an elderly body” (Ferm Almqvist, 2020, p. 294). The pleasure and joy the women experienced while dancing was an affirmation of their sense of belonging and their right to call themselves dancers. It is interesting to note that unlike the maturing dancers in

this study, music and musicality were infrequently mentioned in either the teacher or the adult ballet learner narratives in Chapter Two. This may suggest that music, like the presence of others in the ballet classroom, is a taken-for-granted aspect of dance practice. The absence of mentions of musicality may also indicate that the voices in the learner narratives may be those of novice dancers who are in the early stages of their intertwining with ballet and its cultural world.

The dancers' experiences of pleasure and joy revealed that artistry and music are pathways to transcendence and existential freedom. It was clear in the dancers' transcripts that artistry mattered more to them now as adults than athleticism and technical virtuosity. This sentiment is reflected in the experiences of maturing professional dancers. Here, artistry is often associated with age and the wisdom acquired through years of dance practice (Early, 2013; Hansen & Kenny, 2019; Nakajima, 2011). Retirement from mainstream stage performance means this wisdom is lost (Jeffrey et al., 2022). Unlike the professionals, recreational maturing dancers are not expected to retire from the stage. Jane, Firebird, and Natalia's reflections revealed that their audiences enjoyed watching them dance and were moved by the expressivity they saw on stage. This adds weight to the argument by York-Pryce (2023, p. 57) that the maturing dancers' "embodied artistry should be celebrated and recognised as positive attributes for dance and society." The creative wisdom of maturing professional and recreational dancers has the potential to challenge ageism in "neighborhoods, communities, and society at large by creating social capital" (Hanna, 2013, p. 12).

6.2.2 Accepting ageing as normal and natural

For the dancers in this study, pleasure and joy came from accepting and affirming their status as maturing women. This was experienced as a sense of comfort and ease

stemming from the acceptance of one's body, age, and situation. Being at home in oneself facilitated the embodiment of the maturing dancer identity, and the pleasure and joy that came from this. As revealed in Chapter Five, coming to terms with maturing was not an easy task for any of the dancers. Underpinning all aspects was an ever-present awareness of ageism and other "repressive structures influencing lived experience" (Markula, Jeffrey, Nikolai, & Deol, 2023, p. 156), and a decision to find a balanced middle ground where they felt comfortable.

This facilitated an authentic and deep engagement with the social and physical practices of ballet. As a result, each dancer experienced the wellbeing impacts of pleasure and joy in different ways. Abigail, Jane, and Liza felt comfortable, satisfied, and at ease with themselves. Natalia, Alice, and Firebird were filled with a sense of beauty and felt beautiful. Seeing beauty in oneself and others is a form of crossing and shifting of the normative borders and boundaries of society (Ferm Almqvist et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2016). It is an active and deliberate act of resistance to western dance genres which "exclude people who may not fit the definition of formal beauty" (Houston, 2015, p. 32). Through pleasure and joy, these dancers reclaimed the "ideals of beauty and grace" as their own (Chappell et al., 2021, p. 10). With the support of their dance communities, these women used their "aging agency" (Pines & Giles, 2020, p. 89) to push at and cross the boundaries of the dancing body aesthetic and what it means to be a ballet dancer. For the women in this study, dancing while maturing was a celebration of their beauty and "exquisite imperfection" (Prichard, 2017, p. 79). This undoubtedly contributed to the dancers' feelings of positive physical health, emotional, and social wellbeing.

The dancers' statements on seeing beauty around them and embodying beauty are in direct opposition to de Beauvoir (1949/1993, 1970/1972) who saw nothing beautiful,

joyful, or pleasurable in women or old age. From a Goffmanian perspective, the dancers' feelings of satisfaction, ease, and beauty are made possible through the protection afforded them by their communities who provide a "haven of self-defense" (Goffman, 1963b, p. 153) from external stigma. Fontanesi and DeSouza (2020) supported this by noting that beauty and physical capability are socially affirmed and reinforced through the actions of community members during dance classes.

The ability to perceive the maturing body as beautiful highlights the power of communities to overturn social stereotypes and create new norms. This is supported by the assertions of de Beauvoir (1949/1993, 1970/1972) and Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002, 1964/1968) that human being is ambiguous. As such, our identity and knowledge of self are completed through the gaze of others within our social world. Like the dancers in Fontanesi and DeSouza (2020), the women in this study were seen by their communities as embodying the qualities of balletic and maturing beauty. As such, they came to see themselves as beautiful and capable of expressing this beauty through their ballet dancing. This also raises the possibility that embodying and expressing beauty and joy through dance may be an expectation of those who perform the 'maturing recreational ballet dancer' role (Goffman, 1959).

6.2.3 Being wholly embodied: A new typology of pleasure?

Phoenix and Orr (2014) identified a typology of four types of pleasure that adults experience from physical activity. These are: sensory pleasures; documented pleasures; the pleasure of habitual activity; and the pleasure of immersion. Chipperfield and Bissell (2023) added two other types of pleasure found in ballroom dancing, namely the pleasure of practice and pleasure of community. The reflections of the maturing dancers in this study contain examples of the pleasure and joy gained from the stimulation of

the senses, engaging in dance classes as routine habit, the forgetting about physical pain through immersion in dancing, the pleasure of progression of dancing skills through practice, and the pleasure of being within a community of others who enjoy dance. However, the examples of lived experience used to illustrate the categories identified by Phoenix and Orr (2014) and Chipperfield and Bissell (2023) do not reflect the depth of intertwining, reversibility, and reciprocity that exists between the dancer and their dance. The examples do not reflect the permanence of the imprint that ballet and other dance genre leave on the being of the dancer. It must also be noted that Phoenix and Orr's category of pleasure through immersion was based on the experiences of marathon swimmers reported in Throsby (2013). As Abigail reflected, when comparing her participation in long-distance swimming and dance, "there is no expression particularly in the swimming." Consequently, her feelings of attachment and engagement were different. Swimming lacks the music. As Jäncke (2008) highlighted, music is directly linked to the cognitive functions which govern memory and emotions. The findings of the present study strongly support the argument that the pleasure of immersion category needs to be extended or reconsidered to reflect the dancers' experience of being wholly embodied in and by dance and music.

As it was for the women in Pines and Giles (2020), the physical and social practice of ballet was an intrinsic part of the maturing identities of the participants in the present study. This is particularly evident for those who had danced as children. To varying degrees, ballet practices and pedagogies have shaped who Natalia, Alice, Firebird, Abigail, and Liza are and how they perceive their worlds. Their view of feminine being, aesthetics, and the value they place on the arts have been moulded by their relationships with others in the dance classroom. For these women, ballet was a tool

they used to make sense and meaning of the world around them. In Merleau-Pontian terms, ballet and being are intimately intertwined (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, 1964/1968). For these women, ballet is not just a worthwhile project (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972), it is an essential part of their identity and being. To be separated from the practice and cultural world of ballet is to be missing parts of themselves. They are ballet and ballet is them. They and the social and physical practices of dance are intimately and inseparably intertwined together. This link between pleasure, joy, and dancing positions adult recreational ballet as an activity that gives a sense of purpose, “expresses the pure joy of living” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 623), and opens the individual “towards ever wider horizons” (p. 624).

6.3 Phenomenon 2: Revealing the pathways to and mechanisms of freedom

For Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002, 1964/1968), de Beauvoir (1949/1993, 1970/1972), and Goffman (1959, 1963b), communities are at the heart of social life. They can either support or suppress an individual or a group’s desires for freedom and transcendence. How adults work together to build communities centred around dance practice has generated very few detailed descriptions in the literature. Eight articles were selected for their sensitive representation of the voices of adult recreational dancers and their exploration of the existential themes central to dancing being (Andersson & Ferm Almqvist, 2020; Collard-Stokes, 2022; Dimler et al., 2017; Ferm Almqvist, 2022; Ferm Almqvist & Andersson, 2021; Hill et al., 2016; Moe, 2014; Nicholas et al., 2018). These studies used the voices of adult participants to highlight the pathways or mechanisms that they and their teachers employed to create social worlds providing protection from stigma and the stereotypes which position maturing dancing bodies as incongruent.

These articles support Goffman's assertion that teams protect each other and together create safe spaces where stigmatising attributes, such as age and sexual or gender orientation, are normalised (Goffman, 1963b).

These studies reflect the experiences of maturing women (and sometimes men) in ballet, pole, burlesque, belly, and contemporary dancing. The schools and studios in these accounts used organisational policies to create learning environments valuing inclusivity, diversity, and wellbeing. The teachers played a pivotal role in the creation of educational experiences which privilege pleasure, joy, and freedom. The social beliefs and philosophical orientations of the teachers were reflected in the use of pedagogies which promote liberation through the personal and technical growth of the dancers in their care. The values and beliefs which underpinned these decisions were in turn embodied, deliberately reproduced, and validated by the dancers in their everyday social interactions with others.

The co-construction of these organisations reflects Goffman's assertion that members collaborate together to create organisations that meet their needs (Goffman, 1959). In these eight articles, the members modified the traditional teacher and dancer roles to ensure that their desired organisational culture would be supported and reproduced (Goffman, 1959). All dancers in these articles are considered by Goffman (1963b) to be stigmatised and deviant due to their ages, sexual orientation, or participation in dance genres associated with youth or the display of sexuality. For Goffman (1963b, p. 153) such communities are places of "rebellion" where members "flaunt their refusal to accept their place".

For de Beauvoir (1945/1993, 1948/2015), the co-construction of these communities represents collective acts of resistance against social injustices, and the movement

towards freedom. Relationships, reciprocity of care, and collective resistance to social pressures are the themes common to the selected literature. The dancers in each article experience joy, pleasure, and a degree of freedom through their community activities. As such, these communities are actively engaged in purposeful and worthwhile projects which provide their members with opportunities to transcend and reach “towards ever wider horizons” (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 624).

Ferm Almqvist (2022)

Ferm Almqvist (2022) explored how a group of maturing men and women used contemporary dance as a tool for meaning making, reconceptualising the self and re-engaging with life. A prerequisite to finding one’s authentic self was becoming aware of and shedding the layers of negative stereotypes that held the dancers in immanence and limited their freedom. This required the learners to think of themselves as subjects rather than objects; to see themselves as equal with others in society; and to move from their current mindsets to a future-focused “space of wonder” (Ferm Almqvist, 2022, p. 7). The dancers found that discovering and uncovering one’s authentic self can be risky and sometimes traumatic. Dance equipped them with new ways of expressing themselves, being heard, coming to terms with the past and dealing with negative experiences in the present. The dance studio became a safe place where “the old body seems to be forgotten ... pain is no longer felt, or it is handled in new ways” (Ferm Almqvist, 2022, p. 11), and “all anxiety and tension disappeared” (Ferm Almqvist, 2022, p. 13). For these maturing adults, dancing became an exciting, joyful, and pleasurable experience.

The movement from immanence to transcendence (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972) was only made possible by the dancers and the choreographic team working together. From the

start of the workshop, the teachers intentionally created a learning environment which privileged the breaking down of social barriers through communication and intersubjectivity. Creativity, play, and experimentation were used to help the dancers discover new ways of moving and communicating with each other. The teachers encouraged the learners to think of themselves in new ways and made it clear that maturing dancers are “not expected to look like ballerinas” or “expected to be perfect” (Ferm Almqvist, 2022, p. 7). The choreographer and her assistant treated the dancers seriously by valuing their life experiences, allowing them to contribute to the creativity unfolding, and validating their subjectivity and potential as people. In turn, the choreographic team demanded that the dancers be present in the space, “be open to the idea that new learning is possible” (Ferm Almqvist, 2022, p. 8), and act on corrections, and constructive feedback when given. Through this collaboration, the maturing dancers and the teaching team created something new, unexpected and life changing.

The awareness raising and collaborative activities of the dancers and teachers in Ferm Almqvist (2022) affirm de Beauvoir’s assertions that to be free we must be aware of our oppression (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993) and that we can only find freedom with the help of others (de Beauvoir, 1948/2015). Through the community dance project, the maturing adults developed new “embodied ways of knowing” themselves and the world (Barbour, 2004, p. 227). This, de Beauvoir (1970/1972) argued, is one way maturing adults can achieve transcendence and freedom. Activities which grow knowledge are meaningful and prevent later adulthood from becoming “an absurd parody of our former life” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 601). For Ferm Almqvist’s (2022) maturing adults, dance represented a worthwhile project (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993).

Hill et al. (2016)

Hill et al. (2016, p. 667) investigated the experiences of adult recreational ballet dancers at a school where “gender-neutrality and LGBTQ-friendly behaviours” were used to create a diversity and body-positive “safe space” (p. 668). The school operated outside of ballet’s “socially constituted corporeal norms and expectations” of masculinity, femininity, and body type (Hill et al., p. 672). The school attracted dancers who felt uncomfortable in traditional classes. Crossing these boundaries required the learners to challenge their own beliefs about the ideal ballet body and who can call themselves a dancer. The teachers encouraged each learner to reflect on their experiences and move from seeing themselves as failures to capable, able-bodied movers with self-efficacy, agency, potential, and self-worth. The teachers played an active role in this transformation by welcoming new members into the class, asking the dancers to support and respect each other, and covering the mirrors to help them focus on the feel of the movements rather than how they looked. Support from teachers and the school community, along with individual reflection, and awareness of and resistance to social stereotypes, were key mechanisms in the “(re)claiming” and (re)embodying of the dancers’ ballet identities (Moe, 2014, p. 39). Many learners developed a new appreciation for their bodies and what they could do. Hill et al. (2016, p. 676), however, noted that the pervasiveness of gender and body ideals in ballet meant that its “boundaries were only shaken or shifted somewhat, remaining largely in place”.

As members of the LGBTQ+ community, the participants in Hill et al. (2016) are stigmatised individuals and “social deviants” (Goffman, 1963b, p. 151). Their teachers are stigmatised by association. As they are co-creators of this dance community, Goffman considers them to be “engaged in some kind of collective denial of the social order” (Goffman, 1963b, p. 152). In spite of their deviant status, the opportunity to

dance as themselves provides the members of this community with a “life ... better than that lived by the persons they would otherwise be” (Goffman, 1963b, p. 153).

Moe (2014)

The maturing learners in Moe (2014) shared a passion and love for belly dancing. The dancers used this form of creative movement to manage mobility and health concerns, to make new friends, and to express their sensuality. Through participation in classes and public performances, the learners reclaimed their voices, personal power, and social visibility. Within their school the dancers created an age- and body-affirming “sisterhood” (Moe, 2014, p. 39) centred around a shared belief that belly dancing is “aligned with and complementary of women’s bodies” and that this genre stems “from a woman’s perspective” (Moe, 2014, p. 50). As suggested by Goffman (1963b), this community provided its members with support and protection from the stigma associated with this genre, and the gendered and ageist stereotypes at play in wider society. The teachers facilitated this atmosphere by fostering a judgement-free and accepting environment where dancers were encouraged to move within their own capabilities and to express themselves in ways that were meaningful to them. Together the teachers and dancers constructed a community where “collective joy” and creativity flourished (Moe, 2014, p. 53). The resulting sense of pleasure, empowerment, comfort, “confidence and ease” spread to other parts of the women’s lives (Moe, 2014, p. 53).

From the perspective of de Beauvoir (1948/2015), these women engaged in a collective form of resistance which challenged their own and society’s norms. In questioning and rejecting these stereotypes, the dancers oriented themselves towards transcendence and freedom (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993). Through learning the physical practices of belly

dancing, these women grew their “embodied ways of knowing” (Barbour, 2004, p. 227) and experienced increased physical, mental, and social wellbeing.

Collard-Stokes (2022)

Collard-Stokes (2022) explored how a group of dancers and their teacher co-constructed a recreational burlesque community where the experience of maturing was normalised and the “negative day-to-day experiences of an anti-aging culture” were uncovered and challenged (Collard-Stokes, 2022, p. 160). For the women in this study, maturing being was characterised by a loss of social roles, identities, social connections, and personal voice. These losses manifested as social invisibility, diminished agency, and disconnection from their bodies. The weekly burlesque class provided the dancers with: a means of reconnecting with and caring for their physical selves; improving bodily control, flexibility, mobility, and pain levels; building social networks with other maturing women; replenishing their self-esteem and confidence; and revitalising and taking ownership of their sensuality and femininity. This opportunity to flourish was made possible by the teacher who deliberately created a safe space where joy, freedom, and wellbeing were prioritised. She motivated the women to reach beyond their perceived possibilities by encouraging them to use their imaginations to explore and feel the choreography with their bodies, and to bring “their individuality and uniqueness” to their dancing (Collard-Stokes, 2022, p. 159). The dancers were encouraged to focus on the feel of movements within their bodies rather than how the movements appeared to onlookers. The women observed that the positive energy in the classroom fostered a community of “strongly distinctive dancers moving together rather than a group of dancers trying to fit the same mold” (Collard-Stokes, 2022, p. 15). The teacher enjoyed interacting with the women and looked forward to teaching the weekly class. Together the dancers and their teacher created an age- and body-affirming environment where

each person's voice was heard and lived experiences, agency, and dancing ability were validated.

The loss of identity and invisibility experienced by the dancers in Collard-Stokes (2022) supports de Beauvoir's assertion that women are marginalised by society after menopause (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993). Contrary to de Beauvoir's claims that women are complicit in their oppression, these maturing dancers and their teachers formed a collective. Like the dancers in Moe (2014), the members used this "deviant community" (Goffman, 1963b, p. 151) to meet their own wellbeing needs and to challenge society's "stereotypes about older women becoming asexual" (Moe, 2014, p. 58). Like the dancers in Hill et al. (2016), these women experienced happier lives than might otherwise be expected.

Andersson and Ferm Almqvist (2020)

Andersson and Ferm Almqvist (2020) investigated how participation in contemporary dance may help maturing adults develop their awareness of self and others, integrate their pasts with the present, and take themselves and others seriously. These, Andersson and Ferm Almqvist (2020, p. 262) argued, are the foundations of "dance as democracy". Through activities aimed at increasing bodily awareness and control, the maturing men and women came to view themselves as "functional", living bodies capable of movement, learning, and self-expression (Andersson & Ferm Almqvist, 2020, p. 270). The dancers were encouraged to work on their own interpretations of the stories and to work together as "one body" (Andersson & Ferm Almqvist, 2020, p. 273). Working as a collective required the dancers to relate to each other on a deeper interpersonal level. They used each other's bodies as part of the dance and were encouraged to listen to each other and use touch as a form of communication. This

approach enabled the dancers to develop empathy for each other. They felt inspired by their stories and used this closeness to “create something new together” (Andersson & Ferm Almqvist, 2020, p. 272).

The feeling of connectedness generated between the maturing dancers in this community supports Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the social world of the flesh is created through reciprocity and reversibility of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968). The dancers’ growing bodily awareness of and emotional dependence on their community reflects the intense intertwining of self and others that took place during the dance workshop. This intertwining, expressed as kinaesthetic and emotional empathy, created new knowledge and oriented the community members towards transcendence and freedom (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972). Being part of a community of practice provided a “haven of self-defense” (Goffman, 1963b, p. 153). The stigma of being aged was removed. Through the honouring of the dancers’ memories and past experiences, the community gave each member’s “existence a meaning” (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972, p. 601).

Ferm Almqvist and Andersson (2021)

Ferm Almqvist and Andersson (2021, p. 139) explored how arts participation can empower maturing women to express themselves through dance, “imagine possible new futures”, and be heard by others. A contemporary dance workshop provided the means for exploring how dancing can become a dwelling place shared with others and a “space for learning in later life” (Ferm Almqvist & Andersson, 2021, p. 141). For an educational experience to be transformational, the dancers and teachers need to recognise that the structures which organise activities within the studio “are constituted ... and are constantly being reconstructed” by the dancers who dwell within them (Ferm

Almqvist & Andersson, 2021, p. 136). With this objective in mind, the choreographer and her assistant worked with the dancers to establish an atmosphere of communication, trust and safety for all participants. As the workshop progressed, the dancers grew in self-confidence and felt free to explore their existential possibilities using a variety of music genres, and their own language and stories. The teachers supported the dancers' emerging identities and transcendence by: using "proper dance terms"; teaching basic contemporary technique and improvisation skills; and stressing the importance of safe movement for maturing bodies (Ferm Almqvist & Andersson, 2021, p. 139). Through dancing together in a collaborative, safe "dwelling space", the women discovered "a way to live ... to meet, and become themselves" (Ferm Almqvist & Andersson, 2021, p. 140).

In the community described by Ferm Almqvist and Andersson (2021), control over the present and future rested with the dancers. In their ordinary lives as women and maturing adults, they are powerless. As social deviants (Goffman, 1963b) and objects, they have little control over their lives (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, 1970/1972). By giving permission for decision making to the dancers, this "deviant community" (Goffman, 1963b, p. 151) overturned the social norms and engaged in the "collective denial of the social order" (Goffman, 1963b, p. 152). Learning and dancing were at the heart of their collective rebellion. Through these acts of resistance, the women gained new knowledge about themselves and others, rejected their oppression, reclaimed their subjectivity, and moved towards transcendence and freedom together as a community (de Beauvoir, 1948/2015, 1949/1993, 1970/1972). This reflects the power of organisations to protect their members and to enact social change (Goffman, 1959).

Nicholas et al. (2018)

For the recreational pole fitness participants in Nicholas et al. (2018), a sense of belonging and feeling of connection to their community or “sisterhood” (p. 111) were key to participation and the embodiment of the pole dancing identity. Social support within the school played a central role in countering the negative effects of stigma, prejudice, and stereotypes that positioned them erotic dancers and sexually available. Empathy, friendship, and encouragement from other members helped teachers and dancers create a judgement free and body-positive atmosphere within the studio. As a result, dancers experienced pleasure from participation, increased self-confidence, motivation to persist, acceptance of the bodies of others, and improved self-image.

Dimler et al. (2017)

The pole fitness participants in Dimler et al. (2017) reported similar experiences to Nicholas et al. (2018). In Dimler’s study, the instructors played a crucial role in promoting camaraderie between dancers and an atmosphere of body acceptance. The instructors encouraged the women to share their body-image experiences. Negative body talk was not welcomed. Expression of sensuality and individuality were encouraged. Together, the instructors and dancers created an environment where “unconditional community support” led participants to a feeling of wellbeing, “comfort with their bodies, and general body pride” (Dimler et al., 2017, p. 346). The sense of wellbeing and confidence that came from participation in the social world of pole fitness spread into other parts of the dancers’ lives.

As with Hill et al. (2016), the dancers in Nicholas et al. (2018) and Dimler et al. (2017) are stigmatised social deviants (Goffman, 1963b) due to their participation in a genre that is perceived as a “sexualized activity” (Nicholas et al., 2018, p. 106). As women, the participants were also rendered other and therefore marginalised by society (de

Beauvoir, 1949/1993). These communities challenged the social norms by turning the perceptions of sexual and social deviance into opportunities for learning, challenge, and change. Through the compassionate gaze of their communities, the instructors and dancers helped each other replace negativity and shame with self-confidence and pride. These actions refute de Beauvoir's assertion that femininity is constructed by men for men (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993). In these pole fitness communities, the dancers choose to embody their own alternative model of femininity based around strength and sensuality. This version of femininity contradicts de Beauvoir's belief that women are passive, voiceless, and weak (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993). The members of the pole fitness communities in Nicholas et al. (2018) and Dimler et al. (2017) intentionally engaged in the production and transmission of new knowledge which led to health and wellbeing improvements. As such, their activities can be seen as worthwhile projects that offer women across the lifespan the possibilities of transcendence and freedom (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, 1970/1972).

Andersson and Ferm Almqvist (2020)

In Andersson and Ferm Almqvist (2020), the teaching team intentionally established a transformational learning environment by offering the maturing dancers opportunities to learn new creative skills, to experiment with their bodies, to connect with their memories, and to care for and be cared for by others. The choreographer and her assistant acted as facilitators for change by giving the dancers advice on how to let go and allow themselves to respond to the music, their life experiences, and the stories being told. The teaching team created an atmosphere of openness and inclusion by giving each dancer suggestions on how to "adapt the movements to bodily limitations" (Andersson & Ferm Almqvist, 2020, p. 271). Instructions were given and the dancers were free to explore and interpret the stories individually and with each other. The

teachers participated in the dance-making and acted as role models directing the activities taking place (Goffman, 1959). By assisting dancers to overcome mobility issues and allowing them to respond to the music in their own way, the teachers created opportunities for the sedimenting of new habits and the creation of new bodily knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). By valuing the experiences and contribution of each person and by sharing choreographic decision making, the teaching team enabled the dancers to explore their possibilities and opened the doorway to transcendence and freedom (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972).

6.3.1 Compassionate communities create positive health and wellbeing

The communities described in the eight articles discussed in this section demonstrate the power of dance practice and creative learning (Hanna, 2013) to change health and wellbeing outcomes for adults of all ages. The members of these communities reported decreases in pain and mobility issues, increased self-confidence and self-esteem, improved body image, experiences of joy and pleasure, and a reduction in fear and anxiety. These communities provide examples of how intentionally placing co-ownership of decision making and intersubjectivity at the heart of dance education opportunities can reduce loneliness, social isolation, and depression, which are common health issues as adults age (de Beauvoir, 1970/1972; Hall, 2015; Wright-St Clair et al., 2017).

The eight articles demonstrate the role that reciprocity of perception, reversibility, and the intertwining of self with others play in building compassionate, empathetic, and meaningful communities (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002, 1964/1968). As human being is ambiguous, our identities are created through the gaze of those around us (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, 1970/1972; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, 1964/1968). By changing the

messages conveyed in the words and actions of community members, individuals were able to change their beliefs about themselves, experience joy and pleasure, and explore new possibilities for transcendence and freedom.

6.3.2 The pathways to freedom through dance

The eight articles discussed above shed light on the pathways along which maturing recreational dancers travel when seeking freedom through improved physical and mental health, and social wellbeing. These pathways include:

- Finding a teacher who understands the needs of maturing adults.
- Finding a teacher who is philosophically and pedagogically oriented towards joy and freedom.
- Finding a class or school with a welcoming and supportive community environment.
- Becoming aware of the stereotypes which render maturing bodies as other.
- Having an openness towards change and allowing oneself to be vulnerable within one's dancing community.
- Caring for oneself and caring for others.
- Challenging and exploring beyond the perceived limits of one's maturing being.

The ballet learner voices in the research and grey literature reviewed in Chapter Two offer incomplete glimpses of these pathways. In comparison, the reflections of the maturing dancers in this study provide detailed descriptions of lived experiences of each path to freedom and how these worked together in the adult recreational ballet context.

Social relationships underpin all aspects of these pathways to freedom and wellbeing.

Like the experiences detailed in the eight articles, intersubjectivity is at the heart of the

adult ballet experience. The women's social relationships were threaded throughout their reflections. These relationships were sometimes explicitly discussed but more often the dancers seemed to be unaware of the existence and significance of this social glue that held their worlds together. This suggests that the women unconsciously acted on a tacit need to be with others. For all dancers, the social aspects of ballet seemed to be a strong driver for participation. Their recollections revealed the presence of a positive and restorative energy that was created within their classes and was carried with them into other aspects of their lives. This energy seemed to be shared between the dancers and their teachers and was reignited each time they met. This synergistic relationship served to strengthen the social bonds with classmates and motivated each dancer in this study to focus on improving their technique and artistry. Alfredsson Olsson and Heikkinen (2019, p. 1) described the presence of a similar "emotional energy" in a dance class for maturing adults. This energy was experienced as joy that was "felt throughout the body" (Alfredsson Olsson & Heikkinen, 2019, p. 4). As for the dancers in this study, this energy was created and reignited through positive social interactions in the dance classroom. Like the participants in the eight articles, this energy was felt and expressed as a shared sense of pleasure and joy. It seemed to be a catalyst which prompted each dancer to explore previously unimagined possibilities for the future and to see themselves in a new light. These social relationships were vital to transcendence and freedom, and had a wider effect on health and wellbeing within the dancers' lives. They helped mitigate the negative effects of loneliness, normalised the maturing ballet body in the studio, and provided protection from the stigma associated with ageing in dance.

The presence of this energy between individuals supports Merleau-Ponty's argument that physiologically humans are social beings designed for communication with others (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, 1964/1968). Reciprocity of perception and reversibility are at the heart of the chiasmatic relationship between self and others within the worlds of adult recreational ballet. Individuals are intimately intertwined and interconnected with others who inhabit these spaces even though, as Liza reflected, dancers are sometimes unaware of each other's presence.

These pathways to freedom reveal that dance is a tool for inquiry and a way of knowing about oneself and the world (Barbour, 2004, 2018; Ferm Almqvist, 2022; Snowber, 2012). For the dancers in this study, ballet was a source of social connection, a way of expanding their horizons, and a means of personal growth. These findings support the claims that recreational dance participation is a meaningful and meaning-making activity for maturing adults (Chappell et al., 2021; Ferm Almqvist & Andersson, 2021; Ferm Almqvist et al., 2023). As such, dancing while maturing satisfies the requirements of worthwhile projects for adults in mid- and later life (de Beauvoir 1949/1993, 1970/1972). The value women and their teachers place on dance as lifelong learning and as a social activity contradicts de Beauvoir's assertion that creative leisure is escapism for "idle women" (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 624) and "vain immanence" (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 623). Instead, the women's reflections suggest that dancing confers tangible and meaningful physical, mental health, and social wellbeing benefits that endure within an individual's identity and spread to other parts of their lives.

6.3.3 Teachers are the catalysts for change and freedom

The accounts of the maturing dancers in this study reveal that teachers and their relationships with their learners were at the heart of the process of creating pathways

to freedom. Central to the accounts of the dancers were teachers who intentionally created safe spaces for dancing during adulthood. The reflections of the maturing women in this study and in the literature suggest that supportive teachers and pedagogies grounded in hope were preconditions for an openness and orientation towards joy, pleasure, transcendence, and freedom. This section explores the reciprocal relationship and how the pedagogical choices and philosophical orientations of teachers become catalysts for the transformation of dance studios into an “affirmative community” (Markula, Jeffrey, Nikolai, & Deol, 2023, p. 151), an “affective niche” (Conrad, 2021, p. 189), a “dwelling place” (Ferm Almqvist & Andersson, 2021, p. 134), and “home places” (Hamera, 2005, p. 100) where ageing is normalised, and a diversity of bodies and abilities is embraced.

The dancers’ reflections revealed that the relationships with their teachers were very different to those experienced during childhood. Natalia, Firebird, and Abigail, had mixed experiences of ballet training. Unusually for the 1950s, Alice’s teachers were caring, positive, and supportive. Liza, the youngest of the dancers, did not speak of her childhood teachers. Jane had limited exposure to dance education as an adolescent and did not reflect on the pedagogies she encountered. As children, the dancers had little control over who taught them, or teaching methods used. As adults, this was a very different story.

The memories of childhood teachers stayed with the dancers and helped shape their decision making as adults. Their reflections implied the presence of deeply embodied beliefs about what characteristics made a good teacher of adults. These beliefs may have led the women to seek out dance teachers who used learner-centred pedagogies. Like the dancers in the eight articles discussed in section 6.3, the women in this study

wanted to be treated as adults, to be respected for their lived experiences, and to be taught by professionals who were educated in the needs of maturing bodies. This desire for safe classroom practices is supported by adult learner voices in the grey literature (McDonald, 2018; McManus, 2012). They desired teachers who shared their joy and love of dance. Most of all, the dancers wanted to be encouraged and supported. These were signs that they belonged in dance and were being taken seriously.

The sense of being taken seriously points to two fundamental ideas underpinning the phenomenological writings of Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002, 1964/1968) and de Beauvoir (1949/1993, 1970/1972). Human being is ambiguous as our perceptual senses do not provide us with a complete picture of the worlds we inhabit (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). This makes us both the subjects and objects of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968). As such we cannot possess full knowledge of who we are. Our understanding of self is completed through the gaze of the others who share our world. For the women in this study, their images reflected through the teacher's feedback told them that they were authentic dancers who belonged in the ballet studio (Goffman, 1959; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, 1964/1968).

The link between teacher support and feelings of belonging was also heard in the adult learner voices in the grey literature which identified support and encouragement from teachers as a key factor in their desire to dance (Boyle, 2018; Furness, 2016; Gray, 2017; Lewis, 2012; Nichol, 2016). The dancers in the current study felt that these aspects of practice affirmed their subjectivity, personal agency, self-efficacy, and autonomy. When their expectations were not met, the dancers kept looking until they found teachers and schools who fitted with their philosophy. The dancers' reflections revealed that such

teachers were loved and cherished as people and respected for their status as living repositories of ballet technique, histories, and traditions.

The dancers' reflections revealed that their preferred pedagogies were closely aligned with Bandura's social cognitive learning theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986) and the best practice models for adult teaching proposed by Freire (1972, 1995) and Brookfield (2013b). These authors have suggested that teaching practices which support the development of self-efficacy and autonomy strongly orientate learners towards pathways of hope, freedom, resilience, and wellbeing.

The beliefs and expectations of the women in this study differ markedly from those reported in Whiteside and Kelly (2016). The recreational ballet dancers in Whiteside and Kelly (2016, p. 23) wanted "autocratic, demanding teachers who deserve subservient obedience and acquiescent adherence to instructions". The women in this study expected their teachers to be authorities on ballet technique but were not interested in entering teacher–learner relationships that were autocratic or disciplinarian. Instead, the dancers in this study actively sought ballet experiences which fostered joy, pleasure, transcendence, and existential freedom.

The participant accounts build a picture of schools and classrooms that have a distinctly different character to that of the traditional authoritarian child and vocational classes reported in the literature. While not democratic in the true sense, they are more egalitarian. The move away from authoritarian patriarchal pedagogies has been reported in the literature (Burnidge, 2012; Ritchie & Brooker, 2020) and is viewed as beneficial for non-traditional and marginalised populations (Hill et al., 2016).

6.3.4 Reciprocity of perception is at the heart of relationships

From a Merleau-Pontian perspective, reciprocity involves the active and constant flow of verbal and non-verbal information between the maturing dancers and their teachers within the spaces where dance takes place (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). Reciprocity is experienced as a mutual awareness of each other that is felt, embodied, and imbued with cultural meanings (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). The experiences of the dancers in this study affirm that reciprocity of perception underpins all pedagogical interactions and relationships within the adult ballet classroom. This is supported by the findings of Haraldsen et al. (2023) who determined that the choice of pedagogy impacts the degree of reciprocity between teachers and learners. This, in turn, affects the ability of learners to develop deeper and more meaningful understandings of ballet and has direct impacts on their overall health and wellbeing.

6.3.5 Glimpses into the teacher–dancer relationship

For Goffman (1959), the ballet teacher performs the role of the team director. Directors have oversight of all class activities and the behaviour of dancers in their care. In the only adult ballet teaching manual found during this study, Brassel (2008) shared his perceptions of the relationship between teachers and dancers. Brassel stated that a teacher of adult dance needs to be “approachable” as they are:

addressing a fundamental need, one that should be received with dignity. My responsibility is to create an atmosphere of welcome and warmth, giving and taking away ... the instructor needs to be sensitive, on a lesson by lesson basis, of who is in front of him [sic], how often he sees that person and how well that person appears to be. The work takes care of itself but in all other matters, we are our brother’s keeper. (Brassel, 2008, p. 69)

Brassel’s (2008) description of the ballet teacher role is very different from that which would be expected in authoritarian dance classrooms. His thoughts about the

responsibility of the teacher in setting the atmosphere in the adult dance class reflect the key messages of Andersson and Ferm Almqvist (2020), Collard-Stokes (2022), Dimler et al. (2017), Ferm Almqvist and Andersson (2021), Hill et al. (2016), Moe (2014), and Nicholas et al. (2018). Highlighted in Brassel's statement is the obligation of each person in the studio to care for the dignity, health, safety, and wellbeing of others. Reciprocity of perception and the related concept of reversibility (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002, 1964/1968) are at the heart of social relations in the dance classroom. The reciprocal relationships between the dancers in this study and their teachers were glimpsed in three situations:

- The experience of injury and physical limitations attributed to maturing.
- The giving and receiving of constructive feedback.
- The co-construction of compassionate adult dance communities by teachers and learners.

6.3.6 Glimpse 1: Being a cared-for body and a compromising body

All of the dancers in this study had close relationships with their teachers and classmates. They were open with others about the physical and cognitive changes experienced as they matured and how these impacted their sense of self, belonging, and wellbeing. The dancers' reflections revealed that no matter their age, dancing while maturing was a process of compromise. For many participants, their everyday realities required them to work around injuries and health conditions. Liza found that her athletic capabilities began to change in her early 30s. Like the dancers in Ali-Haapala et al. (2019) and Pines and Giles (2020), Natalia, Alice, Jane, Abigail, and Firebird recalled experiencing decreased cardiovascular endurance, arthritis, difficulties remembering sequences, and executing jumping steps during allégro. These situations presented

challenges to performing the full range of ballet movements that were expected of dancers during childhood. As adults, all needed to spend more time caring for and preparing their bodies for dancing.

Their teachers heard their concerns and responded by including warm-up and conditioning activities during class and by modifying the syllabus to reflect the dancers' needs. Natalia recalled that more focus was placed on the upper body rather than running or jumping steps. Instead, the teachers encouraged the dancers to pay more attention to the quality of their movements, personal expression, and artistry.

The teachers also gave advice to dancers on modifying movements to accommodate health conditions and exercises to support injury prevention and recovery. After surgery, Alice had difficulty moving her arm. Like the instructors in Andersson and Ferm Almquist (2020), her teacher gave her exercises to help her move more freely. Her ability to use her arm changed but Alice stated that she was able to "compromise and make it look graceful." Firebird recalled sustaining an injury during class. She was surprised and deeply moved when her teacher provided immediate self-care advice. Over the weeks that followed the teacher and other professional dancers attached to the school checked on her wellbeing. For Alice and Firebird, allowing themselves to become cared-for bodies and compromising bodies was very important. Through these interactions with their teachers, their sense of belonging in ballet and their identities as capable dancers were reaffirmed. Alice and Firebird returned to classes and resumed their dancing journeys. There is a strong sense within the dancers' reflections that their teachers genuinely cared about their health and wellbeing. Like the young learners in Clark (2014), the dancers in this study deeply appreciated their teachers' care. This suggests that social interactions between the dancers in this study and their teachers

were experienced as “the pleasure of being known, of being recognized ... and ... of being cared for” (Clark, 2014, p. 141). These examples of care and being cared for strongly resonate with Merleau-Ponty’s chiasmic relationship between self and others (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968). A deeply intimate and meaningful intertwining between the teachers and students is sensed throughout the maturing dancers’ reflections. Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) suggested that reciprocity of perception and reversibility involve a constant dialogue between individuals across the interworld within the flesh. Given this, it may be assumed that the health and wellbeing benefits experienced by the dancers were also felt by their teachers.

Alice and Firebird’s accounts reinforce the need for teachers to be trained in safe adult dance practices. This need is reiterated by Curwen-Walker (quoted in Armah, 2022) and the teachers in Graham (2023). Curwen-Walker, a New Zealand teacher and choreographer, designed the Senior Swans ballet syllabus specifically to meet the needs of maturing recreational dancers learning in community contexts (Senior Swans, 2023). Curwen-Walker recalled that, when she was developing the programme in 2016, she did “not really [know] exactly what I was going to do, all I knew is I would need to modify. With my classical ballet teaching experience, I’m very aware of watching for injuries, potential injuries and safe-dance practice” (“Silver Swans,” 2019, para. 17). In response to the needs she observed in classes, Curwen-Walker’s adaptations included “modifying the jump section and adding more stretch and balance” (quoted in Armah, 2022, para. 8). Creating or adapting a syllabus is more than simply changing the movements. The dance practitioners in Graham (2023) stressed that clear verbal and visual communication between the teacher and adult learners is essential if a culture of safety is to be established and maintained. Wendy Morrow noted that ballet for adults “has to

be taught really carefully and the person that's teaching has to be really well trained in ballet" (quoted in Graham, 2023, p. 195). Morrow considered that appropriate teaching methods involve the teacher performing the movements alongside the learners and "articulating and verbalising" the feel of each movement within their own body (quoted in Graham, 2023, p. 195). Ensuring the emotional wellbeing of dancers is as important as ensuring their physical safety. This can be challenging for "young teachers" who may have no lived experience of being maturing bodies or who have not been trained in this aspect of practice (quoted in Graham, 2023, p. 195).

The reflections on being cared-for bodies and compromising bodies contrast markedly with professional dancers for whom injuries may "terminate a dancing career" (Turner & Wainwright, 2003, p. 269). From the perspective of Goffman (1963), the body is a tool, and injuries are a form of disability and therefore an attribute that acquires a temporary or permanent stigma. In professional ballet, an injury renders the dancer unable to comport themselves in a manner expected of their role (Turner & Wainwright, 2003). Not only does the injured dancer find themselves questioning their belief in their role, they are also scrutinised by other company members (Goffman, 1959). If they are unable to recover and uphold their part in the performance of reality, they risk being removed from the dance company (Turner & Wainwright, 2003).

When reading the accounts of the dancers in this study, there is a strong sense that the empathetic and compassionate reciprocal relationship between teachers and learners mitigated the effects of stigma and shame. Recreational dancers did not appear to suffer the same degree of mortification or shame (Goffman, 1963b) as the professionals. Instead, teachers and learners worked together in partnership to co-create environments for lifelong learning where experiences of joy, pleasure, and freedom are

offered “regardless of age or associated health conditions” (Hills & Snook, 2023, p. 214).

The removal of shame from the experience of dancing brought health, emotional, and social wellbeing benefits for the maturing women in this study.

6.3.7 Glimpse 2: Constructive feedback is a pathway to freedom

[My teacher] has faith that I can improve. That trust and faith is very inspiring. I want to do better when she corrects me. I don't think, “Oh, I'm doing my best.” There's none of that resentment. It's an absolute gratitude and excitement. She's telling me that I can make this step better. (Jane)

I vividly recall this section of Jane's interview. Her eyes twinkled, she grinned from ear to ear, and her voice overflowed with excitement and emotion. For just an instant, I shared Jane's memory of her and the teacher engaged in this most intimate and formative moment in the being of the maturing recreational ballet dancer. In that instant and many like it, the teacher gave Jane constructive feedback on her technique and artistry. She took Jane seriously, reaffirming her subjectivity, dancer identity and belonging in ballet. In response, Jane was deeply moved. She came to believe “that I can get better ... I think there is still the ability to improve ... and I still have the capacity to learn new things.” Through these positive interactions with her teacher, Jane felt motivated to persist with ballet, dreamed of dancing possibilities she had not previously imagined, and continued her journey towards transcendence, freedom, and wellbeing.

Similar experiences of feedback were recounted by the other dancers in this study. The schools where they felt most at home were the ones in which their teachers gave them feedback for improvement. Constructive feedback came to be an expected and welcome part of dancing. Natalia reflected that feedback was given “in a gentle manner ... you felt encouraged and accepted for where you were at [laughter].” Natalia noted that her teachers did not “settle for, ‘Oh well, you are just an old lady trying to do ballet.’ They

don't settle for that at all [eyes twinkle with delight]." This suggests that feedback is a key element in the reciprocal relationship between teachers and learners. Like the dancers in Kolb and Kalogeropoulou (2012), Jane and Natalia perceived receiving feedback as a pleasurable experience. Their recollections also suggest that receiving these comments unconsciously mitigated the social and ballet stereotypes that render maturing women as invisible and worthless. This implies that constructive feedback for maturing dancers contains messages that they are seen and worthy of attention, investment, and care. This implicit messaging may be part of the attraction of recreational ballet for adults in general. This is supported by the observation of Martell (2019, para. 16) that adult ballet dancers "are all about soaking in corrections." The giving and receiving of constructive feedback is one of the key interaction rituals in the dance classroom. As Alfredsson Olsson and Heikkinen (2019, p. 3) noted, "successful interaction rituals" lead to positive dance experiences and a sense of wellbeing for individuals and those they dance with.

In an International Association for Dance Medicine and Science blog aimed at dance teachers, Rathle (2018, para. 4) noted that the way feedback is given helps or "hinders dancers in their learning potential and psychological well-being." She argued for the use of constructive feedback rather than corrections which focus on the negative aspects of performance. Rathle (2018, para. 5) suggested that positive feedback provides dancers "with tools in order to feel, sense and understand what they can do in order to improve." These recommendations reflect the pedagogical interactions described by the dancers in this study and support the assertions in the eight articles discussed in section 6.3 that the teacher's pedagogical orientation is the key to creating classrooms where joy and freedom are possible.

The positive effects of constructive feedback, as described by Jane and Natalia, support the claims that recreational ballet is a way of knowing and making meaning for maturing adults (Barbour, 2004, 2018; Snowber, 2012). This implies that feedback is seen by dancers as a means of growing their understanding of self, ageing, and their place within the world. As such, adult recreational ballet is a meaningful activity which makes positive contributions to the health and wellbeing of maturing women.

6.3.8 Glimpse 3: Dancers and teachers co-create communities

According to Goffman (1959), teams work together to strategically co-construct a desired impression of reality. They do so in a manner that meets the needs of all the members within the organisation. Goffman's analysis of how this process takes place is often interpreted as manipulative, cold, and calculating. The dancers' reflections, however, reveal something quite different. The co-creation of dancing communities was based on shared goals, communication, and negotiation, and a desire for outcomes that benefit the teachers and maturing dancers. This enabled all members to be their authentic selves during their performances of reality in the front and back stages of their dance schools.

The dancers in this study and their teachers collaborated to co-create flesh worlds where adults of all ages and abilities were welcomed. Like the dance schools in the eight articles highlighted earlier in this chapter, an ethos of caring-for-self and others seemed to permeate the fabric of this flesh and produced compassionate communities where all involved felt nurtured and thrived.

Brassel (2008, pp. 41-42) provided an example of the learning space that he and his adult learners co-created:

The sense of camaraderie is palpable ... there is the caring. Then there is the feeling of participating in a very special activity ... it is an inclusive experience ... as the class grows in numbers, so does the friendliness; a sense of contentment supported by physical activity.

Brassel's remarks draw attention to the presence of a dynamic, felt, collective energy created by those who inhabited the studio. During the interviews for this study, similar energies and affective responses were noticed. The qualities and effects of this energy on the experiences of ballet and wellbeing were seen in the dancers' embodied responses but were rarely the subject of their reflections. From a Merleau-Pontian perspective this is not unexpected. The norms and practices which underpin intersubjectivity are forms of tacit knowledge and are taken-for-granted parts of our pre-reflective and implicitly embodied understandings of our social world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002).

During the iterative reading of the transcripts and reflecting upon the dancers' interviews, it became clear that a vibrant yet compassionate energy was always present in the background of their experiences. This seemed to have had a significant influence on the women's continued ballet participation, their embodiment of the dancer identity, and overall sense of wellbeing. The five moments that follow, shared by Jane, Liza, Abigail, and Alice, allow us to reflect on the essences at the heart of the creation of compassionate communities as safe places for dancing ballet while maturing.

This is where we are meant to be

Jane's voice was overflowing with excitement and a look of joy spread across her face as she reflected on her surprise that she and her maturing classmates were:

allowed in a ballet studio, and that somebody is willing to take the time to teach us. The teachers are standing there, not finding it ludicrous and thinking it's fantastic that we are actually willing to have a go. I love that in the teachers. (Jane)

At the heart of the experience recounted by Jane is the teachers' genuine belief that maturing adults have a legitimate place in the ballet classroom. They were seen as worth the investment of teaching time, and as having knowledge and skills to contribute to the future of dance. Like the dancers in Andersson and Ferm Almqvist (2020) and Ferm Almqvist and Andersson (2021), Jane and her classmates were taken seriously by their teachers. As with the experience of constructive feedback, Jane felt a sense of deep gratitude, pleasure, and contentment. She felt that walking into her dance school as an adult was a risk worth taking. The ballet studio was where she and her maturing classmates were meant to be.

Jane's feeling of belonging and acceptance had a positive impact on her health and sense of emotional wellbeing. This reveals that social interactions within the adult ballet communities can be immensely motivational and meaningful for adults as they mature.

Relationships are the social glue

Liza's roaring laughter filled the interview room and her eyes twinkled as she recounted how the "vibe" in a class made a difference to the learning experience. Liza reflected that:

even if we had a bad night, we are enjoying ourselves and the mood is lifted ... you are having a bit of a laugh and it's social and also serious. You gotta know when to shut up ... or not! [roaring laughter] ... it's not just about the dance, it's also about social connection with other people ... when you get on the same vibe, it's quite good. (Liza)

Liza's reflection revealed that at the heart of the adult ballet phenomenon is a desire for maturing women to be with others who share the same passion. Each person brings their experiences, feelings, and beliefs into the classroom. Through the everyday social practices of ballet, new friendships are made, old relationships are renewed, and dancers dream together of tutus, pointe shoes, performances, and possibilities yet to be

realised. From a Merleau-Pontian perspective, this communication across the interworld of the studio results in the intertwining of the multiple perspectives of the inhabitants, stronger social bonds, and new understandings of ballet (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968). As suggested by Andersson and Ferm Almqvist (2020) and Ferm Almqvist and Andersson (2021), taking each other seriously and creating new experiences may become pathways to joy, transcendence, and freedom.

Liza's reflection reveals that adult ballet communities are created through social relationships. The sense of interconnectedness and bonding between members has positive impacts on the health and wellbeing of maturing women.

Safe places during difficult times

Abigail and Alice's interviews revealed the importance of dance classes as safe spaces for dealing with depression and loneliness. These are two key issues which negatively impact the mental health and wellbeing of maturing women in New Zealand (Hall, 2015).

Tears rolled down Abigail's face as a vivid memory unexpectedly resurfaced and interrupted her reflections. She was taking dance lessons during a difficult part of her life:

The only person who noticed was my dance teacher [crying] ... for him to notice that I was struggling at that time ... I probably didn't know that I was suffering from depression. I probably didn't know that ... but he knew ... I kept going there because I loved to dance ... dance helped me through. (Abigail)

To Merleau-Ponty, we are intercorporeal beings who are highly attuned to the spoken words and subtle embodied expressions that others give off (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2002). In her interview Abigail did not specify how she knew that her teacher had noticed her sadness. The fact that he did notice was deeply meaningful to Abigail. Her

teacher saw her as a person and showed empathy and compassion. In the depths of depression, Abigail realised that she was worthy of being seen, that she mattered to someone, and that dance in turn mattered very much to her. This is a poignant example of the role that non-verbal communication plays in our social relationships and reflects a comment that Natalia made that dance enables people to express things that words cannot.

Alice was reflecting on retirement and the changes this brings to social relationships.

Her dance school became:

my second family ... because when you retire people die [emphasis], people move away, people change, people leave their husbands, and you never see them again [a little upset]. You know [clears her throat] ... [brief pause] ... [at the studio] you get to know new people and make new friends ... I've got new friends ... which is nice ... especially at our age because so many people have died [softly laughs]. (Alice)

Alice's reflection revealed that retirement had a negative impact on her social relationships and consequently on her own emotional wellbeing. Like the burlesque dancers in Collard-Stokes (2022), Alice greatly valued the friendships she made through ballet and enjoyed being part of a "sisterhood" based around "compassion and camaraderie" (Collard-Stokes, 2022, p. 163). Alice's observations about retirement were not unfounded. Retirement is a time of transitions that can bring loneliness and social isolation. Loneliness, with or without the added factor of social isolation, is associated with poorer health and quality of life outcomes (Wright-St Clair et al., 2017). In New Zealand, "loneliness was highest for women" (Wright-St Clair et al., 2017, p. 114) and "a significant health issue for older New Zealanders" (Wright-St Clair et al., 2017, p. 121). Making meaningful social connections is a way of combating these issues (An et al., 2023) and has a positive impact on physical health, and social and emotional wellbeing.

For Abigail and Alice, dance and its social worlds became a “dwelling place” where they could care for themselves, be cared for, and care for others (Ferm Almquist & Andersson, 2021, p. 134). Through reciprocity of perception and reversibility, dancing and being-with-others becomes a “healing and life-enhancing” experience (Purser, 2019, p. 262).

The lived experiences recounted in this section reveal that the intersubjective aspects of dancing in a community make significant and meaningful contributions to the physical, emotional, and social wellbeing of maturing women. For Abigail and Alice, the support within their dance communities provided a means of coping with the physical and social changes that come with maturing in a society where ageing is othered.

Shame has no place here

Alice was recounting the experiences of dancing in a new class with a mix of young adult and maturing dancers. Suddenly Alice’s cheeks turned bright red and her eyes began to twinkle as a new recollection surfaced. During a tricky sequence, Alice recalled falling over:

one of the little girls came and helped me up. [Roaring laughter] I said “Oh dear, I feel so embarrassed. I feel I should apologise.” [Alice puts on a gruff voice] “Don’t apologise,” said the young dancer, “My granny is the same age as you and I can’t even imagine her attempting this.” I thought, ‘Oh, this has made me feel a lot better!’ [happy, chirpy voice]. ... I can imagine where granny is ... she is at home. There’s no way granny is going to go ballet dancing [the room fills with roaring laughter]. (Alice)

In the interviews for this study, most accounts of younger dancers portrayed them as representations of the idealised youthful ballet body. They were described as thin, athletic, very capable, and disinterested in or socially distanced from the maturing dancers in the class. Alice’s reflection suggests that a different relationship existed between the generations in her school. In this social interaction she did not seem to be

viewed as incapable, slow, or old. Instead, through the compassionate gaze of the young woman, Alice's ballet dancing identity was reaffirmed and she was recognised as a person rather than an object. Alice's feelings of embarrassment were temporary. She was not stigmatised or othered by the experience as would be expected by Goffman (1963b) and de Beauvoir (1949/1993). This suggests that the everyday presence in the school of Alice and her fellow maturing dancers may have had the effect of "subverting expectations and presenting alternatives" to the dominant social narratives of ageing as decline (Goulding, 2023, p. 4). This raises the possibility that the culture in Alice's school deliberately positioned maturing adults as role models for dance as a lifelong activity. This community and others like it acted as a "haven of self defense" (Goffman, 1963b, p. 153) from discrimination and stigma. For the maturing dancers this school represented such a place. de Beauvoir (1970/1972, p. 324) proposed that old age is seen "through the vision that others have of us". This suggests that the young dancer in Alice's reflection may have seen her and other maturing women as representing new possibilities for dancing into middle age and beyond.

In this study the maturing dancers and their teachers collaborated to challenge the narratives of incongruence through the co-creation of social worlds or communities of adult ballet practice. These compassionate communities provided spaces for building meaningful social connections with others, for learning to dance, for affirming maturing being (Sandberg, 2013), for healing and wellbeing, and for the celebrating their "exquisite imperfection" (Prichard, 2017, p. 79) and "exquisite joy" (Hills & Snook, 2023, p. 208). For the women in this study, their dance schools represented more than "safe spaces" (Hill et al., 2016, p. 668) that protected them from stigma (Goffman, 1963).

These compassionate communities became embodied spaces where each woman was able to express her own identity and meaningfully engage with life.

Living in a manner of one's own choosing is a courageous decision for maturing adults. When the community consciously removes the stigma around ageing and being aged, personal growth and positive health and wellbeing outcomes become a possibility.

6.4 Phenomenon 3: Raising awareness of the marginalisation of maturing dancers

Threaded throughout the reflections of the dancers in this study was an ever-present awareness that they were each very fortunate to have found schools and teachers who welcomed adult learners into their classes. Each of the women who had danced in childhood encountered ageism and othering during their search for ballet learning opportunities as adults. This had the effect of strengthening their determination to resist society's judgements and advocate for the right for maturing adults to access dance learning in mid- and later life. This section briefly discusses the dancers' awareness and experience of the stereotypes underpinning their marginalisation and their accounts of attempts at resisting immanence created through their status as maturing women (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993).

6.4.1 The social construction of the maturing female body

According to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002, 1964/1968), our being-in-the-world and identities are shaped in part by our interactions with others within our social worlds. These relationships may validate our subjectivity or render us as objects. As maturing women, the dancers in this study are classified by Goffman (1963) as 'discredited' and therefore stigmatised bodies (Cecil et al., 2022; Chaudoir et al., 2013). Ageing flesh,

illness, and disability are “abominations of the body” (Goffman, 1963, p. 12). A maturing woman with a disability or health condition has a “multiplicity of stigma” (Fukushima et al., 2020, p. 125). As de Beauvoir (1949/1993, 1970/1972) noted, body- and age-related stigmatisation impacts women throughout their lives. Cecil et al. (2022) found that gendered ageism and age-shaming were experienced by women as early as in their 30s. Stigma becomes internalised and has a negative impact on maturing women’s health and wellbeing (Dolezal, 2015). This impact does not lessen with age (Roy & Payette, 2012). In New Zealand and overseas, the popular media, in particular social media, is responsible for creating and perpetuating the negative stereotypes and messages targeting women (Meisner, 2021; Morgan et al., 2021; Tortajada et al., 2018). These messages depersonalise, dehumanise, and devalue young and maturing women (Meisner, 2021).

In this study, one dancer was under 40 years old and five were aged 50 and over. As such, most dancers are classified as ‘baby boomers’ (Meisner, 2021). The social construction of ageing in New Zealand labels these women as ‘older adults’ (Morgan et al., 2021) and ‘elderly’ (Amundsen, 2022). These categories are accompanied by stereotypes relating to social value, and cognitive and physical ability. Through the lens of these stereotypes, maturing women are constructed as: less attractive, less mentally competent, and less physically able (Cecil et al., 2022); burdens on society and declining (Amundsen, 2022); and passive and vulnerable (Morgan et al., 2021). Gendered ageism and body stigmatisation render women increasingly invisible as they age (Cecil et al., 2022; Dolezal, 2015).

The dancers in this study were highly aware of the social messages around ageing bodies and the popular representations of ballet dancers. The ‘we are not young dancers’

theme was threaded throughout their narratives. The dancers were pragmatic and upfront about not being able to live up to the representations of the youthful ballet body. This knowledge did not stop them from taking part in classes, public performances, or spreading the adult ballet message in the popular media. If anything, their decisions to embody the ballet dancer role prompted all dancers to openly challenge the ageing and body stereotypes they encountered in their dancing and non-dancing lives. The motivation to challenge and resist popular images of ballet as a youthful activity was highlighted by Firebird and Liza. Firebird recalled that she frequently reminds herself that her decision to return to ballet was about the pleasure and joy of dancing rather than looking like a ballet dancer. She was adamant that other dancers and the audience need to see a diversity of ballet bodies on the stage. Liza hoped that the young women in her daughter's studio would see her practising and realise that ballet dancing can continue into adulthood. Like the other dancers in this study, Firebird and Liza strongly believed in being the change they wanted to see. In doing so, the dancers affirmed de Beauvoir's belief that to free oneself, we must also free others (de Beauvoir, 1948/2015).

6.4.2 The invisibility and hypervisibility of maturing female bodies

The increasing social invisibility of women as they mature is a recurring theme in the literature on the experiences of ageing in western society. Invisibility can be defined as a perception of the lack of social value and meaningful social roles (Hofmeier et al., 2017), and no longer being sexually desirable (Rodgers et al., 2016). Tiidenberg (2018) examined Instagram social media accounts to identify the messages that women over 40 years old were generating and receiving. Tiidenberg (2018) found that the visibility of maturing women is framed through messaging around fashion and fitness. Fashion

messaging was tied to youth, beauty, thin bodies, and consumerism. Fitness messaging focused on weight loss and exercise-driven lifestyles. Success and happiness for women was constructed as being thin, youthful, beautiful, and physically active. Underpinning these themes were messages that promoted and valued motherhood and self-sufficiency. Ageing was constructed as an unnatural process, something that had to be managed by women under 50 and defied by those over 50. Tiidenberg (2018) noted that these discourses are pervasive and rarely challenged. Maturing women who cannot meet these narrow and often unachievable constructions of womanhood become socially invisible and hypervisible at the same time.

The theme of invisibility was not explicitly investigated in this study. Jane was the only dancer to reflect on this issue. She strongly disagreed with the proposition that maturing women in New Zealand become invisible as they age. Jane felt that no-one in her social circle:

would expect me to become invisible. I think I'm not in that group where you've had your job, your family, now just quietly fade away. I've never stumbled across that expectation of me and personally I think what helps is that I still have the belief that I can get better ... I don't know what disappearing would mean. (Jane)

de Beauvoir (1970/1972) stressed that maturing adults remain whole people when they undertake projects which continue to engage them in life. Such projects are meaningful in that they focus on personal growth and development. Jane's reflection reveals that learning ballet as an adult is an existentially valuable activity. Like the other dancers in this study, Jane immensely enjoyed the experience of learning ballet and appreciated the health and wellbeing benefits it brought her. Jane believed that learning to dance was a worthwhile project and something she could excel at. Ballet has helped Jane and the other dancers remain whole people with futures and possibilities yet to be explored.

This suggests that participation in ballet as an adult may effectively counter society's strong desire for maturing women to become invisible.

6.4.3 Social stereotypes around dancing in New Zealand

The women in this study did not speak directly about the underlying social stereotypes that framed their experiences of dancing while maturing. Their reflections revealed that they were, however, very aware that adult participation in ballet was considered unusual in New Zealand society.

Natalia, Alice, and Abigail recalled that they came from families where dancing was not a common activity for adults. As children they enjoyed dancing and were sent to classes. As adults they were not expected to continue dancing. Abigail was the only dancer to reflect on the reasons for this. Abigail suggested that this aversion to dance may have its basis in the expression of masculinity in "New Zealand Anglo-Saxon culture". Men are no longer "in touch with their dance side ... you watch Jane Austen movies ... men danced! ... It was a thing that men did [excited] ... do you see any of us doing it now?" Abigail reflected that dancing is an everyday activity for "our closest neighbours in the Pacific and South-East Asia ... dance is not as hidden away as it is here ... people are dancing and we are not ... I cannot understand why you don't want to move."

Natalia, Abigail, Alice, and Firebird hinted at the social stereotypes and criticism they encountered when friends or colleagues found out they were dancing. Instead of being supported as they expected, the dancers were ridiculed, rejected, or socially distanced and discredited by their social networks outside of ballet (Goffman, 1959). This exclusion and labelling of the dancers as other was often conveyed through humour (Canales, 2000). The reactions of their friends and colleagues reinforced the stereotype of ballet

as an activity for children and added to the dancers' sense of being out of place, further marginalised, and incongruent. To minimise this criticism and stigma, the dancers chose to hide their activities from friends and colleagues and avoided performing in front of family. This use of audience segregation (Goffman, 1959) suggests that the social and physical practices of ballet were recognised by each woman as an intimately intertwined, deeply meaningful, and highly valued part of her identity. This reflects the claim by Stinson et al. (1990, p. 16) that "the meaning of dance is intertwined with the identity of the students." It also suggests that the women experienced ballet as a wellspring of health, freedom, and existential transformation. By concealing their love of dance from outsiders, they protected the "ontological inseparability" (Clark, 2020, p. 221) of the chiasmatic relationship between the self and ballet, and minimised the impacts of negative social stereotypes on their health and wellbeing.

6.4.4 Stereotypes of the ballet body render maturing adults as other

Dolezal (2015, p. 61) stated that "shame is always expressed through the body". The themes of shame and stigma are apparent in varying degrees in all accounts of the dancers in this study. The tensions between the desired youthful ballet body and the reality of maturing being were threaded throughout the women's stories. The message that 'real dancers do not look like us' underpinned most women's reflections of being maturing dancing bodies. Real dancers were constructed as younger, taller, slender, shapeless, and beautiful. The dancers' reflections revealed that this definition of the desirable ballet body was conveyed by childhood teachers and pedagogical interactions, and was then reinforced during adulthood by the scarcity of adult ballet classes and dancewear suitable for maturing bodies.

The perceived imperfections of their bodies were discussed in detail by the dancers. Weight and appearance were a significant focus. Alice, Jane, Firebird, and Abigail seemed to accept their maturing bodies with resolution and humour. For Natalia, in her 70s, her perceived bodily imperfections seemed to be a source of immense personal shame and regret. Liza, the youngest dancer in this study, seemed to be the least concerned about how her maturing body might be judged by others. Liza's lack of concern suggests that, as a younger woman, she may have a higher degree of personal agency and self-confidence than a more mature individual (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993). As such, Liza may have felt less impacted by the social stigma around maturing. However, like the dancers in Clark (2014), Green (1999, 2001), Millar (2018), Pickard (2012, 2013, 2016), Scott (2021), and Thomas (1993), it is highly likely that Liza would have been aware of the pressures within professional dance to appear thin and youthful. Both traits are associated with the feminine aesthetic in ballet (O'Flynn et al., 2013; Pickard, 2015; Risner, 2014; Sayers, 1993, 1997). A recent New Zealand report found that "the majority of our young women struggle with negative body image" (YWCA, n.d., p. 4). Given these statistics, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Liza would also have been aware of and subject to similar body scrutiny outside of dance classes. Data on experiences of body shaming are not available for maturing New Zealand women.

The dancers' reflections revealed that messages about what constitutes a desirable body for ballet and their fit with that stereotype were relayed to participants during childhood. These messages were communicated directly and indirectly by their teachers. Natalia recalled that she knew by her early teens that she did not have a ballet body, so she stopped dancing. Abigail and Firebird received similar messages from teachers. It was clear during the interviews that despite the passing of time, these

messages had left a lasting imprint on the women's feelings of wellbeing and self-worth. Reading those accounts and sensing their impacts throughout each woman's reflections was one of the saddest and most difficult aspects of this study to deal with. The pedagogies which created such negative experiences and helped shape the dancers' identities were summarised in Chapter Two.

The negative imprint of ballet stereotypes and pedagogies on body image were largely absent from Jane's account. Jane did not learn ballet as a child. Her reflections revealed that she was highly aware of the social messaging around the ballet body yet appeared less impacted by it. Threaded through her account was an awareness that she did not fit the expected appearance and age for a ballet dancer. Instead of allowing these messages to limit her feelings of wellbeing and personal agency, Jane used social media and the internet to validate her beliefs that everybody can be a dancing body. Jane anticipated that her decision to take up ballet would meet with strong disapproval from others. However, she felt that she could resist the stigma that others would label her with and decided not to pass or cover up her deep engagement with this potentially stigmatising activity. Jane, like the other dancers, chose to look beyond the materiality of the ballet body and seek something much deeper and more meaningful (Aalten, 2004; Clark, 2020). In doing so, they opened themselves to the possibilities of joy and pleasure, transcendence and freedom, and improved physical health and emotional wellbeing.

6.4.5 Dancewear reinforces incongruence

In the reflections of the dancers in this study, dancewear was a source of great agitation and annoyance. This was a visual reminder that they were not youthful ballet bodies and that their status as maturing women marked them as outsiders in the dance world. Their recollections predominantly focused on the leotards, tights, and skirts commonly worn

in ballet classes worldwide. The dancers were aware that this clothing was worn by professionals (Lord & Stewart, 2022; Tomic-Vajagic, 2014) and it enabled the teacher to view the positioning and movements of a dancer's body (Green, 2002). This knowledge did not make the experience easier. For Stinson (2005, p. 55), dancewear "reveals every flaw" and students "look in a mirror at their imperfections."

In their narratives, the dancers reflected on the reasons for their choice of dancewear, the experience of seeing their maturing bodies in revealing clothing, and the frustration of not being able to find dancewear appropriate for the adult body. Respect for traditions, fitting in, and aesthetics were the key reasons given by participants for wearing the ballet costume in class. Firebird noted that wearing the appropriate dancewear was a sign of respect for ballet traditions. The dancers felt that wearing the class costume helped them fit in and made them feel like real dancers. These sentiments reflected those of the participants in Whiteside and Kelly (2016). By choosing to attend class in dancewear, rather than sportswear, they communicated their embodiment of an authentic ballet dancer identity to the school community and outsiders. In this situation, the choice of clothing acts as a "sign vehicle" (Goffman, 1959, p. 15) and may help the individual feel that "she belongs in and inhabits this space in a particular way, as a 'real dancer' with the capacity to move and perform as such" (Clark, 2020, p. 220). While participants in this study rationalised their decision to wear leotards, tights, and skirts, and the enjoyment of doing so, all were very vocal about its inappropriateness for maturing adults. All dancers commented that leotards were not designed for the curves and proportions of adult bodies. For Natalia, the close-fitting dancewear reminded her of the inadequacy and sadness she felt about her maturing body.

The dancers' narratives on dancewear were underpinned by an intense awareness of the social stereotypes surrounding the youthful dancer and the stigma associated with being a maturing female body. These ballet costumes, designed to increase the visibility of the body, had the effect of uncovering some participants' insecurities for all to see. Their dancewear represented a lack of control and an inability to conceal the realities of ageing. As Alice noted, in an Instagram world where everyone has "perfect lives, perfect bodies, and perfect performances", all your imperfections are out there for everyone to see.

6.4.6 The dancers recognised that teachers are the key to change

For the dancers in this study, supportive teaching environments created meaningful learning experiences which positively impacted their health and wellbeing. Their recollections revealed a very different relationship with their teachers than would be expected in a childhood or authoritarian studio. The dancers described teachers who used learner-centred and adult pedagogies in their everyday classroom practice.

Petsilas et al. (2019) and Weidmann (2018) argued that learner-centred pedagogies are the key to growing dancers who are reflective critical thinkers with "self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-regulation, self-reflection and finally professional self-efficacy" (Petsilas et al., 2019, p. 31). This approach is "guided by values of mutuality, solidarity and justice" (Schwittay, 2023, p. 14) rather than the reproduction of historical oppressions, power imbalances, and immanence. Learner-centred teaching offers the possibility of turning dance classrooms from disciplinary to safe spaces oriented towards joy, hope, transformation, and freedom.

Petsilas et al. (2019) and Weidmann (2018) both focused on child and youth dancers. The central tenets of the student-centred approach are, however, closely aligned to the principles underpinning the adult education philosophies of Freire (1972, 1995) and Brookfield (1991, 1995, 2013a, 2013b). These principles include critical reflection, empowerment, respect for diversity, dialogue between teacher and learners, and transformation. These aspects of learner-centred and adult pedagogies were present in the reflections of the dancers in this study. The use of such approaches signalled to women that the teachers within welcomed maturing adults and these were places where they could dance, dream, and thrive.

Flipping the ballet classroom from being teacher-centred to learner-centred requires radical philosophical and pedagogical change within the entire dance profession. Zeller (2017, p. 99) argued that “ballet’s institutional resistance to pedagogic change is not surprising; teaching practices that subordinate the student have long been considered not just inextricable from, but necessary for professional quality ballet training.” Zeller stressed that is not the case. Bringing reflection and critical thinking into the dance classroom “can preserve – rather than distort or dilute – the classical tradition’s emphasis on form and style” (Zeller, 2017, pp. 99-100).

If ballet organisations are slow to reflect modern pedagogical thinking, then change must come from within the dance teaching profession and from among professional dance artists. Zeller (2017, p. 100) stated that teachers and professional dancers “at all levels must reconsider the authoritarian idea. This reconsideration requires the dismantling of authoritarian structures, including pedagogies.” Zeller’s comment acknowledges the power that professional dancers in all roles have when making decisions about the selection and reproduction of pedagogies and ballet bodies

represented in the classroom and on stage. The reluctance of teachers to challenge their own perceptions may reflect a fear of losing control, power, and authority in the studio (Zeller, 2017). Ballet practitioners have a habit of teaching “as they were taught” (Dragon, 2015, p. 28). In doing so, they choose to perpetuate the stereotypes which negatively impact the health and wellbeing of young people and professional dancers. Dragon (2015, p. 27) noted that the teaching identity is “malleable” and an “evolving centre of connections where all that constitutes an individual’s life coalesces.” In other words, the dance teaching identity develops as the teacher matures. Change is possible and is necessary for the survival of ballet as an art, a social practice, and a profession.

Teachers have a social responsibility to resist the use of authoritarian pedagogies in their youth and adult classrooms. Traditional ballet pedagogies “uphold ageist sociocultural norms” and have the “potential to cause harm, marginalize and stigmatize” learners (Harvey, 2023, p. 92). Creating positive learning experiences requires teachers to believe that maturing dancers are equals and possess infinite possibilities. Taking adults seriously requires the teacher to create a learning environment which prioritises: intersubjectivity; trust and expectations; creativity and experimentation; and an openness to change, constructive feedback and progression (Andersson & Ferm Almqvist, 2020; Ferm Almqvist, 2022; Ferm Almqvist & Andersson, 2019). The accounts of the maturing recreational dancers in this study support the assertions that these pedagogical qualities lead to existential change and promote positive health and wellbeing outcomes.

6.4.7 Teachers are also maturing ballet dancers

The dancers in this study all seemed to recognise that their teachers, as professional ballet dancers, had a different relationship with ageing. They seemed to be aware that

retirement from the stage had an impact on the wellbeing of their teachers. Liza, Natalia, and Alice specifically reflected on this aspect of their relationships. Liza stated that her teachers are “also adults and adult dancers like us ... they’re all going through that same ageing process as the rest of us.” She hoped that working with maturing adults might help her teachers “feel good about ageing” and to realise that “you don’t have to give everything up because you are getting older.” In the reflections of Liza, Natalia, and Alice, there was a sense they were aware of the unspoken difficulties that ballet teachers encounter in coming to terms with growing older and in experiencing a degree of denial or fear of ageing.

Resistance to change may reflect ballet practitioners’ grief and sense of loss around ageing and becoming maturing ballet bodies, and the changes these bring to professional roles and personal identity. Coming to terms with being maturing bodies is a topic rarely discussed in the dance literature, yet it is something which impacts the experience of dance for professional and recreational dancers. Ritenburg (2014) described the relationships three maturing ballet teachers have with their bodies and how these impact their sense of self and their dancer identities. Like the recreational dancers in this study, the teachers were very aware of the appearance of their bodies and the changes in their ability to dance and demonstrate movements in class. The themes of “losing the ability to dance” (Ritenburg, 2014, p. 197) and no longer being idealised ballet bodies were at the forefront of their experiences of teaching. Like the maturing dancers in this study, the teachers reflected on how past injuries inhibited their performance of steps; jumping and controlled movements were no longer possible; warming up before teaching became a priority; and the focus of dance moved from the lower body to artistic expression using the upper body. The teachers felt that “their

bodies no longer 'performed' or responded as when they were in training; however, all still managed to create the aesthetic experience that they identified as 'dancing'" (Ritenburg, 2014, p. 213). These concerns are also reflected by the dance professionals in Duffy (2022) who employed a variety of problem-solving strategies to continue teaching as they matured.

Like Alice, Jane, and Firebird, one of Ritenburg's teachers was accepting of ageing as a natural process and responded by adapting her expectations and practices. For the others, the physical signs of ageing were a source of sadness. In a profession focused on youth and athleticism, this sense of loss challenged their identities. One participant felt that her maturing body was "negatively affecting her performance as teacher" (Ritenburg, 2014, p. 209). Another described this as "a sad situation. As you grow as a teacher your knowledge grows but what you can demonstrate lessens" (Ritenburg, 2014, p. 198).

6.4.8 Teachers have similar yet different experiences of maturing

The accounts of the teachers and recreational dancers reveal strong similarities in the physical aspects of maturing. The cultural experiences of ageing are, however, very different for ballet practitioners and recreational dancers. The participants in Ritenburg (2014) did not seem to experience the same depth of grief and trauma as the retired ballet professionals in Dean (2023). For these dancers, ageing was experienced as the loss of employment and of "social network, place and belonging, structure (comfort and familiarity), greatness and significance, expressive outlet and physicality" (Dean, 2023, p. 95). The loss of technical virtuosity that accompanies the "decline in a dancer's physical capital" (Wainwright & Turner, 2004, p. 107) was a realistic threat to their professional identity. There is also a sense that, for the participants in Ritenburg (2014)

and Dean (2023), ballet's emphasis on youth and athleticism devalues the wisdom that practitioners acquire as they mature. This did not appear to have been an issue for the maturing recreational dancers in this study. The bodily knowledge and wisdom they accumulated as maturing adults and dancers was valued by their teachers, fellow dancers, and their audiences.

The studies by Ritenburg (2014) and Dean (2023) suggest that there may be notable differences in the experience of ageing for ballet practitioners when compared to recreational dancers. Through the social gaze, a woman becomes mature when she enters menopause in her mid-40s to late 50s (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993). The stereotype of the ballet body categorises professional dancers as mature when they retire from performing in their mid-to-late 30s (Edward & Newall, 2011; Hansen & Kenny, 2019; Kassing, 1981; York-Pryce, 2020). The label of 'maturing' is not necessarily adopted by choice. For the ballet practitioner, 'maturing', as an age category, is not a "proposition" (Jeffrey et al., 2022, p. 4) or a label that they choose to embody when it suits them (Paoletti, 1997). Viewed in this light, Dean's analysis suggests that the stigmatisation of ageing and a decline in physical athleticism create a greater sense of identity loss, incongruence, marginalisation, and shame for professional dancers.

While aware of the negative stereotypes of ageing in New Zealand society and in ballet, the maturing recreational dancers in this study seemed to be less constrained by them. Abigail, Alice, Firebird, Liza, and Natalia expected to be able to continue learning ballet as adults. Their accounts suggest that none considered themselves too mature for dance classes. Liza was shocked by the negative response from her teacher when she asked for technical progression. Natalia and Jane were shaken by the discovery that 'adult' in the ballet world means someone in their late teens or 20s. Despite their self-confidence and

desire to dance, the dancers realised that in the gaze of ballet they were maturing and therefore not potential talent or worthy of investment. From a Goffmanian perspective, the impression of reality they expected was not what they encountered (Goffman, 1959). The women's confidence faltered, and they were unsure if they could meet the team norms and expectations. This sense of incongruence was mitigated when the women found classes designed for adult bodies and where the teachers believed in their abilities to learn ballet, progress, and flourish. This belief shared between the dancers and their teachers encouraged chiasmatic intertwinings that created intensely meaningful dance experiences. These became catalysts for joy, pleasure, transcendence, and freedom and produced positive impacts on physical health, social, and emotional wellbeing.

6.4.9 Recreational dancers choose alternative models of femininity

The historical constructions of the female ballet dancer are "frozen in time, a statue of idealized perfection" (Risner, 2014, p. 4). These constructions define femininity as passive, docile, obedient, silent, ethereal, delicate, and fragile (Aalten, 1997; Daly, 1987; Sayers, 1993). Like de Beauvoir's woman, the female dancer is a perpetual "adolescent" (Aalten, 1997, p. 56), an object "to-be-looked-at" (Daly, 1987, p. 17), and her identity is "defined overwhelmingly by men" (Garafola, 1985, p. 35). Despite the social changes brought about by the feminist movement, ballet has failed to "rid its aesthetic of yesterday's cult of the eternal feminine" (Garafola, 1985, p. 35). This out-dated model of femininity "itself became the ideology of ballet" (Garafola, 1985, p. 52), "created and reiterated during training and by ballet organisations" (Aalten, 1997, p. 52). Oliveira Souza et al. (2022, p. 12) claimed that these behaviours and beliefs have become "institutionally required for the practice of ballet".

Recreational dance is a site of resistance against the negative construction of femininity in professional dance. Kolb and Kalogeropoulou (2012) noted that these negative descriptions of the social construction of femininity and gender roles come from professional ballet and vocational training contexts. These authors stressed that the employment conditions which reinforce many of these stereotypes for female dancers create pressures which are not experienced by dancers in the community context. As such, this narrow construction which restricts personal agency, self-efficacy, and the possibilities for freedom and transcendence may have less impact on the wellbeing of maturing recreational ballet dancers. Marshall (2020) provided another example of resistance to traditional views of femininity in western concert dance. Marshall (2020, p. 3) interviewed dancers and their teachers about what constitutes a “supportive and productive learning environment” in recreational contemporary and jazz dancing contexts. The young women in Marshall’s study chose to embody a view of femininity as “strong, powerful and passionate” (Marshall, 2020, p. 21). Physical strength and self-confidence were seen as feminine qualities and mattered more than appearances. The traditional view of dancing femininity as “soft, delicate, gentle and sensitive” has lost its popularity (Marshall, 2020, p. 21).

The maturing recreational dancers in this study were not prompted to reflect on their perceptions of femininity. All women were aware of the stereotypes of the ballet body but not all chose to reject them or to openly embody alternative perceptions of what femininity could be. Abigail, Firebird, and Jane, in their 50s and 60s, openly rejected some aspects of the ballet body and, like the dancers in Marshall (2020), also saw the strength, muscularity, and physicality of their teachers and the ballerina as feminine qualities. Allowing young people to see strong maturing women on the stage was

particularly important for Firebird and Jane. Notably, Natalia and Alice, both in their 70s, did not comment on this aspect of dancing. In fact, Alice found the sight and thought of sweaty people at the gym repugnant. Liza, in her 30s, did not comment on the strength and precision of women in dance. Instead, Liza lived the experience of being a strong dancing woman. The descriptions of her ballet practice invoked a sense of the pleasure she derived from being strong, athletic, and deeply embodied.

Marshall (2020) demonstrated that change often starts at a grassroots level. This is the experience of adult ballet which has seemingly always existed on the fringes of the dance world. Like the classes described in Marshall (2020) and Kolb and Kalogeropoulou (2012), adult recreational ballet offers the possibility of disrupting the traditional authoritarian model of ballet pedagogy (Petsilas et al., 2019).

By resisting and rejecting the traditional model of femininity in ballet, the women in this study overturned the stereotypes which deny the agency, beauty, and grace of the maturing body (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993). In doing so, the dancers opened themselves towards the existential possibilities offered by joy, transcendence, and freedom.

6.4.10 Breaking the stereotypes for future dancers

Like the maturing professionals in Markula, Jeffrey, Nikolai, & Deol (2023), the dancers in this study resisted the social stigma created by ageism and the restrictive conceptions of the ballet body through awareness-raising and educating themselves and others. In this study, being part of a compassionate dance community provided protection and support for those who wished to speak out against the perceived injustices and inequalities that they and others experienced.

Liza provided a reflection which suggests that solitary individual protests are less effective in creating change than collective action. Liza's adult ballet class performed the same exercises each week. There was no opportunity to progress her technique and artistry. Liza approached the teacher asking for higher level content to be included in the class. The teacher responded that she did not "think that the director will agree ... what are you going to do with it?" [laughs in frustration] My answer was 'What are most of your child students going to do with it?' Nothing." Without the protection of a compassionate community, Liza's pathway to transcendence and freedom through dance was extinguished. Within the social world of a new school, Liza was able to dance to her heart's content, progress through the levels, and think about the possibilities of training as an adult ballet teacher.

Alice, Jane, and Firebird became ambassadors for adult ballet, actively telling anyone who would listen about their love of dance and attempting to recruit maturing women to join them. Jane and Liza talked about being role models for younger women. Jane wanted young dancers "to see people who are still looking forward, still looking ahead, still wanting to improve and enjoying what they are doing." Liza hoped that young people would recognise her "as an adult dancer and see that even if you don't dance as a career, it doesn't mean you have to stop dancing."

All the dancers in this study were vocal about their role in actively breaking the ballet stereotypes. All danced ballet in classes and performances. The women invested considerable time developing their technique and artistry. All cared for their maturing dancing bodies. They proudly wore dancewear and ballet costumes. As members of compassionate communities, they cared for others and in turn were cared for. Dancing was at the centre of their lives, their dreams, and future plans. Each of these activities

was a significant act of agency and embodied resistance to objectification and immanence.

For all the women, ballet dancing was an act of embodied protest and activism. Each challenged the ageist and narrow stereotypes of the ballet body through the acts of dancing and performing. By dancing and allowing themselves to experience pleasure and joy, they showed other women and audiences that even the simplest movements can be beautiful, and that expressivity and artistry are as desirable as the demonstrations of athleticism by professional dancers. Being part of an adult recreational ballet community provided a safe space for taking risks and greatly enhanced the dancers' sense of belonging, health, wellbeing, and quality of life.

However, like their teachers, the maturing dancers in this study continually walked a fine line between transcendence and freedom, and sinking back into immanence. The compassionate communities co-created by the dancers and their teachers are fragile social worlds. They were constructed by and for maturing women, who are other and objects in wider society. As members of a subculture that challenges the norms, they are considered social deviants (Goffman, 1963b). As such, the dancers and their teachers cannot entirely escape the pressures imposed on them by ageism and body stereotypes in ballet and wider society. For maturing recreational dancers to remain, survive, and thrive within the ballet world, dancers must remember that "to will oneself free is also to will others free" (de Beauvoir, 1948/2015). Collective resistance, activism, and advocacy are the prices of freedom.

6.5 Chapter summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate the research question and sub-questions:

What are the lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes?

- How does recreational ballet participation contribute to health, wellbeing, and positive ageing for New Zealand women?
- What social and situational factors contribute to the creation of positive and meaningful pedagogical experiences for maturing women who participate in recreational dance?

The meanings of these experiences and the health and wellbeing impacts were explored through three phenomena highlighted in the interviews of the dancers:

- Pleasure, joy and freedom. These are at the heart of recreational ballet practice and maturing dancing being.
- Revealing the pathways to and mechanisms of transcendence and existential freedom through dance. These are glimpses of how maturing dancers and their teachers co-construct the social worlds of adult recreational ballet.
- Raising awareness of the marginalisation of maturing dancers. Adult recreational ballet is resistance and activism against the social stereotypes which render maturing recreational and professional dancers as the invisible other.

Interrogation of these phenomena using the writings of the three theorists and the literature revealed expected and unexpected interpretations. The presence of joy and pleasure were expected but the intensity of these experiences, their association with expressivity, and the direct link to health and wellbeing were not expected. The women's embodiment of the dancer identity and the enduring imprint it left on their everyday lives was unexpected. Most unexpected of all was the intensely intimate chiasmic intertwining between the dancers and their teachers. This was a rich and

immensely rewarding relationship for the women and had positive impacts on their health and wellbeing. The combination of joy and pleasure, the embodiment of an identity which affirmed maturing being, and rewarding social relationships all came together to support the dancers' transcendence, freedom, physical health, and emotional and social wellbeing. These insights and interpretations would not have been possible without the use of a methodology blending three theorists who privileged embodied experience. Without interviewing the teachers, it is not known if they as maturing adults also experienced similar benefits from their relationship with ballet.

The reflections of the dancers support the claims of Hills and Snook (2023) that participation in recreational ballet is about the pursuit of "exquisite joy" (p. 208) and "opportunities for newness" (p. 214). Through this lens, recreational ballet for adults, as a social and physical practice, becomes a worthwhile project that expresses "the pure joy of living" (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 623) and leads maturing women "towards ever wider horizons" (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, p. 624). No longer docile and passive, the maturing recreational dancer becomes the embodiment of "liveliness" (Clark, 2020, p. 210), "vitality" (Clark, 2020, p. 211), creativity (Hanna, 2013), beauty (Houston, 2015), transcendence, and freedom. Each woman in this study experienced improvements in her physical, emotional, and social health and wellbeing as a direct consequence of immersion in dance. Through ballet, the maturing women in this study danced themselves whole again.

Chapter Seven, the conclusion of this thesis, summarises the significance and contribution of this research to dance practice and scholarship, provides reflections on the research process, and offers recommendations for action and future research.

Chapter 7 Conclusions, recommendations, and reflections

You have to learn to disturb the air. It's no good just going into a room, whether to learn or to teach. Your duty is to disturb the air, to make that which was before, different. (Gillian Lynne, quoted in Jays, 2014, p. 52)

7.1 Disturbing the air

The aim of Chapter Seven is to reflect on the entire research process. The significance and contributions of this study to dance knowledge and scholarship are summarised and reflections are offered on the philosophical lenses used to view the data. Reflections on the methods selected for this research and the limitations of this study are made. Recommendations for action are offered to stakeholders and suggestions for future research are made. In the last section of this thesis, I reflect on my learnings from undertaking this study.

This project began in 2016 after I happened to notice an unusual phenomenon during my ballet classes: my classmates' eyes twinkled all the time. Their eyes twinkled when they walked into the studio, during classes, and when they left. They seemed excited, contented and joyful. I became increasingly curious to know why. The women in the online dance communities seemed to share a similar joy of dancing. In 2016 I discovered by accident the *Big Ballet* reality television series on YouTube (Rare Day Productions, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). The plus-size adult ballet dancers talked about their joy of dancing and their experiences of body shaming. Watching the series and reading the media storm that followed was mortifying and thought provoking. I rewatched the episodes many times and began to think about the stereotypes that my classmates and I encountered in our everyday dancing lives. I realised how lucky we were to dance in a school that welcomed maturing bodies of all ages and shapes. In 2018 I read the *Ballet*

Moves for Adult Creative Health research report from the Queensland Ballet (Ali-Haapala et al., 2018) and later that year attended their classes in Brisbane. While dancing with the women and reflecting on my adult ballet experiences at home, the penny dropped. I realised that the sense of joy I was observing was not just happening in my classes, it was occurring in other places where maturing women danced ballet for recreation. On my return to New Zealand, I stumbled across the *Active Older People 2016-2020 Discussion Document* (Sport New Zealand, 2016). This called for sports organisations to partner with maturing adults and advocate for increased provision of sport and active recreation opportunities. This was the first time I had noticed the voices of maturing adults being valued and taken seriously. Curiosity got the better of me. Excited by the possibility of finding stories on the adult ballet movement, I searched the academic research databases. I found nothing on adult recreational ballet. In the eyes of sport and recreation researchers, the dancers – in the online social media communities, in the *Big Ballet* series, in adult ballet classes everywhere – did not matter. This study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of six maturing women who participate in recreational ballet classes in New Zealand. The philosophical writings of Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002, 1964/1968), de Beauvoir (1949/1993, 1970/1972), and Goffman (1959) were used to understand the dancers' relationships with ballet and others within this world. The findings from the phenomenological interviews revealed three key themes within the women's experiences:

- Pleasure and joy are at the heart of recreational ballet practice and maturing dancing being.
- The compassionate communities co-created by dancers and their teachers facilitate transcendence and freedom.

- Participation in adult recreational ballet is an act of resistance and protest against the social stereotypes which render maturing recreational dancers as incongruent and other.

This study is an advocacy project which aimed to “disturb the air” by raising awareness of the meaning of ballet in the lives of maturing women in New Zealand (Gillian Lynne, quoted in Jays, 2014, p. 52). Through the hearing and sharing of the voices of these women, it is hoped that readers and dancers will support, champion, and lobby for increased provision of ballet and dance learning opportunities for adults.

7.2 Significance and contributions of the findings

Until 2018, maturing recreational ballet dancers as a population were largely invisible in the academic research on sport and active leisure and in the grey literature produced by ballet organisations and dance schools. A small body of literature has been published during the last six years yet significant gaps in the knowledge remain. This study makes a small but significant contribution to understanding the lived experiences of maturing recreational dancers in New Zealand, the meanings of ballet within their lives, and their place within the wider adult recreational ballet “movement” (Kopytko, 2015, para. 5).

The significance and contribution of this study to dance scholarship and knowledge are outlined under these headings:

- This is ballet but not as we knew it.
- Resisting stigma and ageism through the co-creation of compassionate adult dance communities.
- Pleasure and joy are the pathways to transcendence, freedom, and wellbeing.

7.2.1 This is ballet but not as we knew it

Sayers (1997, p. 135) asked the following question:

Does the 'meaning', imagery and associations of ballet in amateur practice relate simply and straightforwardly to ballet as an art form in the theatre, or does it have something of its own, peculiar history relating perhaps as much to other factors as to the art form itself?

Sayers' question arose from her observations on the weekly ballet class which served as a rite of passage for middle- (Klapper, 2020) and working-class children (Konttinen, 1989) in urban centres in countries throughout the western world. Her question resonates strongly with dancers' voices in this study. The findings suggest that adult ballet as a physical and social practice is different to both the ballet performed on stage and that which is taught in recreational classes for children. This study suggests that while the three cultural groups share common roots in the 14th century classical ideals, adult recreational ballet as described through the voices of the six maturing women is a legitimate sub-culture or physical cultural social movement in its own right. This study suggests that the alternative focus of adult recreational ballet produces different outcomes for health and wellbeing than the dance practices of children and professionals.

It is argued here that these different outcomes result from the privileging of artistry over technical virtuosity and athleticism. Artistry is the physical expression of creativity, beauty, pleasure and "exquisite joy" (Hills & Snook, 2023, p. 208). This is a different experience to the childhood and professional classrooms which focus on rote learning through mimicry, the perfection of technique, and the reproduction of repertoire. In contrast, ballet for maturing dancers and their teachers is a compassionate "dwelling space" (Ferm Almqvist & Andersson, 2021, p. 140) created through the use of learner-

centred adult pedagogies (Brookfield, 2013a), pedagogies of hope (Freire, 1995), and creative possibilities (Glăveanu & Beghetto, 2020; Schwittay, 2023). The adult ballet classroom privileges the “exquisite imperfection” (Prichard, 2017, p. 79) of maturing being and is a space alive with creativity, hope, possibilities, and opportunities for “newness” (Hills & Snook, 2023, p. 214).

This study suggests that ballet for adults does not represent a lowering of standards (McCarthy, 2006); rather, it is a sympathetic and “affirmative” (Sandberg, 2013, p. 11) pedagogical approach which recognises and accommodates the physical and cognitive changes that take place as we enter middle and later adulthood. By bringing artistry to the forefront of the experience of dancing, adult recreational dancers of all ages continue to support ballet as a performing art.

The dancers in this study reported improvements in their physical health and mobility. The most notable impacts, however, were social wellbeing and mental health. Chapter Five revealed that, for those women who danced during childhood, ballet was an inseparable part of their identity. The inability to find and access recreational ballet learning opportunities as adults left them feeling that part of themselves was missing. For all women in this study, taking ballet classes and participating in the social world of adult dance renewed and strengthened their sense of subjectivity, belonging, self-worth, self-efficacy, and autonomy.

This study makes a significant contribution to dance knowledge and scholarship by highlighting the similarities and differences between adult recreational ballet and other dance practices. This study also continues the research started by Ali-Haapala et al. (2018, 2019, 2021) and Pines and Giles (2020) by increasing the knowledge around the maturing ballet dancer identity and the meaning of dance in women’s lives.

7.2.2 The co-creation of compassionate adult dance communities

This study highlighted the significance of adult recreational ballet communities as sites of resistance to ageism and the marginalisation of maturing adults in society. The dancers' reflections revealed that they co-created these safe spaces with their teachers. The ethos of care and compassion which underpinned these communities positively impacted the health and wellbeing of the dancers in this study. Through the support and social bonds created, dancers protested and advocated for the rights of adults across the lifespan to access high quality, safe, and age-appropriate dance learning opportunities. This study contributes to scholarly knowledge by documenting the formation of compassionate communities in recreational ballet, illuminating the role they play in supporting the social wellbeing of maturing adults, and highlighting the use of these social worlds as tools for resistance and protest.

7.2.3 Pleasure and joy are the pathways to freedom and wellbeing

This study continues the research of Ali-Haapala et al. (2018, 2019, 2021) and Pines and Giles (2020) on the role of pleasure and joy in the experience of maturing recreational ballet. It contributes to the scholarly literature on this topic by utilising a phenomenological approach which privileges the lived experiences and voices of women. Pleasure and joy were found to directly relate to the dancers' feelings of transcendence, freedom, and wellbeing. Using Merleau-Pontian perceptual phenomenology, pleasure and joy were shown to be an intersubjective phenomenon created through the chiasmic intertwining of the dancers and their teacher, with music, movement, and ballet culture. Joy and pleasure were "felt throughout the body" (Alfredsson Olsson & Heikkinen, 2019, p. 4) as a dynamic energy which permeated the spaces inhabited by the maturing dancers. Music played a key role in the embodiment

of these emotions and their expression through artistry. The findings of this study align with the eight research articles highlighted in Chapter Six in demonstrating that pleasure and joy are directly linked to experiences of increased health and wellbeing for maturing adults.

For the maturing dancers in this study, adult recreational ballet became a means of dancing themselves whole again. Through the experience of pleasure and joy, they were able to reconnect with the missing pieces of themselves and again become wholly embodied people.

7.3 Reflections on the contributions to the research process

This study contributes to filling a gap in the scholarly knowledge on adult recreational dance by utilising a methodology blending perceptual phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002, 1964/1968) and existential phenomenology (de Beauvoir, 1949/1993, 1970/1972) with Goffman's dramaturgical framework (Goffman, 1959) to examine the lived experiences of maturing recreational ballet dancers. Goffman's dramaturgical approach provided a framework for understanding the organisation of the social worlds of adult recreational ballet and how stigma impacts social relationships. Merleau-Pontian perceptual phenomenology offered a way of seeing how we as embodied beings are both created by and the creators of the flesh worlds in which we exist. Through this lens it was possible to uncover the mechanisms underpinning intersubjectivity and to see how these enabled the women to embody the maturing recreational ballet dancer identity. de Beauvoir's feminist phenomenology provided a way of seeing how feminine being is shaped through our interactions within the social structures created by and for the patriarchy. de Beauvoir also offered a tantalising view of how women and maturing

adults can find freedom and liberation from social oppression and marginalisation through resistance, protest, and collective action.

7.3.1 Reflections on the methodological underpinnings

These three methodological choices were an excellent fit for this study. I originally intended to use a hermeneutic methodology but found that Heidegger's (1927/1996) notion of *Dasein* did not provide a means for understanding the experience of being a living body. I fell in love with Merleau-Ponty after reading the writings of Amie Purser on the embodied nature of being and skill acquisition in professional dance (Purser, 2008, 2011, 2018a, 2018b). I abandoned Heidegger and have never looked back.

Merleau-Pontian perceptual phenomenology recognises that the body has a language of its own. Sometimes the body's messages are easy to see and hear, other times they are hidden and quiet. Researching experiences of an embodied phenomena required me to be attentive not only to the women's spoken words but also to the conscious and unconscious language communicated through movements, reactions, and emotions. This meant that interviewing was often an exhausting and emotional experience for the women being interviewed and for me the researcher.

Matching the transcripts with my notes and memories of each woman's body language took a long time. I used my knowledge of dance technique and memories of the feel of ballet within my body to help interpret the language given off by the women during their interviews. Being a maturing recreational ballet dancer gave me insights into the women's experiences that dance teachers and professionals such as Ali-Haapala (2019, 2021), McManus (2012), Pines and Giles (2020), Shen (2020), and Shen and Rowe (2023) may not have experienced or understood.

Using perceptual phenomenology was difficult but worth the effort. I was rewarded with deep, rich, thick and meaningful data that could not have been elicited using another strand of phenomenology or other methodologies. The use of an embodied approach enabled the telling of stories that have not been told before. These stories are about how participation in recreational ballet is used by maturing women to take back their power, to occupy space, to see themselves as worthy, and to become wholly embodied again.

7.3.2 Reflections on the research methods

One of the attractions of qualitative methodologies is that they allow the voices of research participants to be heard. From the outset of this study, it was very clear that the voices of maturing recreational dancers were absent from the research literature and rarely heard in the publications of dance organisations. The choice of research methods used for data collection can silence or illuminate the phenomenon being investigated. This study makes a significant contribution to dance knowledge and research practice through the use of embodied interviewing and the “physical-cultural insider” perspective of the researcher (McNarry et al., 2019, p. 2).

From a Merleau-Pontian perspective, interviewing is an embodied experience which involves a constant two-way dialogue between the researcher and the participant across the interworld between the flesh. When seen from this perspective an interview should privilege and respect the verbal and non-verbal communication being exchanged. For this reason, I intentionally approached interviewing as “giving into gravity” (Engelsrud & Rosberg, 2022, p. 1835). This involved critically reflecting on my role as a researcher, thinking about the power imbalances that exist in the research relationship, and consciously deciding to put aside any assumptions I may have had about the maturing

dancers and their experiences of adult recreational ballet. This seemed to create a space for openness and trust which enabled the women to reflect on their relationships with dance and its meaning within their lives.

During the planning stage of this study, I had hoped that the women would speak about the physical experiences of dancing so that I could explore Barbour's assertion that dance is one of the "embodied ways of knowing" (Barbour, 2004, p. 227). This did not happen as I had expected. Instead, the women reflected on their experiences of joy and pleasure while dancing with others. On this occasion I did not get what I wanted. I got something much more valuable. The resulting data was richer, deeper, and more intense and meaningful than I could have imagined. I strongly doubt that the quality and thickness of the experiences recounted would have been the same had a 'disembodied' method of data collection such as video interviewing and ethnography been used. These would have missed subtle nuances and may have further marginalised the maturing bodies women interviewed by rendering them as objects of the researcher's critical gaze and camera. Embodied interviewing is difficult but it was worth the effort.

As a maturing adult recreational ballet dancer, I am a "physical-cultural insider" (McNarry et al., 2019, p. 2). My researcher perspective is significant and a point of difference from the previous research undertaken by Ali-Haapala et al. (2019, 2021) and Pines and Giles (2020). Like the dancers in this study, I also have had similar experiences of being marginalised as a female, as a maturing adult, and a non-normative body in a dance genre which equates clothing size with beauty. As an insider I understand the experience of being a maturing learner in a genre which privileges technical perfection and athleticism. Like the maturing dancers in this study, I am one of the 'lions' in the African proverb recounted by Chinua Achebe (as cited in Brooks, 1994), whose history

has always been told by the 'hunter'. This is significant, as the previous research documenting the experiences of maturing recreational dancers has been written by ballet teachers. This raises questions about power imbalances between the researchers and their participants, and the unconscious perpetuation of ageism and ballet stereotypes which render maturing dancing being as incongruent. I cannot help but wonder if these stories told by the hunters are accurate reflections of who we are, the physical and cognitive realities of our practice, and the meaning of dance within our lives.

The use of embodied interviewing and my role as a participant–researcher enabled the dancers and I to create new knowledge about and new understandings of dancing while maturing and how dance practices contribute to the health and wellbeing of women as we age.

7.4 Limitations

The three key limitations of this study are outlined in this section. These are intersectionality, the small sample size, and researcher bias.

7.4.1 Intersectionality in the participant sample

No demographic data was collected in the participant consent form and no questions were asked during the interviews to prompt reflections on ethnicity, social class, and socioeconomic status in relation to dance. These aspects of the dancers' lives were rarely mentioned when they reflected on their relationships to ballet practice or the social worlds of dance. I therefore caution researchers to take this into consideration when using the findings from this study.

7.4.2 Small sample size

This study investigated six maturing dancers' lived experiences of the phenomenon of adult recreational ballet. Little guidance is provided to researchers on the ideal number of participants for studies grounded in a phenomenological research design. Instead, the sample size is dependent on the ability of the researcher to elicit deep, rich, and meaningful accounts of participant experiences of the phenomena (van Manen, 1997). Data saturation is reached when no further new patterns of meaning around a theme emerge from the participants' stories (Laverty, 2003). Bartholomew et al. (2021) noted that a larger sample size is desirable in quantitative studies and disciplines where data is generalised to represent a population. In qualitative approaches, however, a higher number of participants was linked to lower quality data. Bartholomew et al. (2021, p. 3) suggested that this may be due to "suffocating or blurring the voices of the participants, thereby distancing the results from their expressions of consciousness." For this reason, Bartholomew et al. (2021, p. 12) conclude that for "phenomenology, it appears samples should be smaller." Nonetheless, the focus of this study on the depth of meaning of dance may limit the range of experiences captured. I recommend that researchers take this into consideration when seeking to conduct studies of their own.

7.4.3 Researcher bias

Bias is an ever-present concern in qualitative studies as "the researcher is both the instrument of data collection and the interpreter of it" (Florczak, 2021, p. 22). In phenomenological studies, bias may be present in the relationship between the interviewer and participant, the selection of the questions and the interpretation of the data (Florczak, 2021). The notion of bias also implies "leaning unfairly toward a position that is not based on truth" (Florczak, 2021, p. 20). This study is grounded in a social

constructionist epistemology which acknowledges that multiple realities or truths may exist. As such, there is no one universal truth and bias may be present.

A number of measures were taken to reduce the possibility of bias. Reflexivity was embedded into all stages of the research. At the start of this study, I was interviewed by an experienced researcher to help uncover my own biases around women, ageing, and recreational dance. A journal was kept during the data collection and interpretation phases. My supervision team held me to account for my decision making throughout this study and particularly during the data analysis and interpretation. I acknowledge that in spite of these measures there is a possibility that bias has crept in. I therefore caution researchers to take this into consideration when using the data or findings.

7.5 Recommendations for action

The section contains recommendations for action for the three key stakeholder groups: maturing recreational dancers; teachers and maturing professional dancers; and national organisations and dance schools.

7.5.1 Recommendations for maturing recreational dancers

Until the lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter. (Achebe, quoted in Brooks, 1994, para. 11)

If we, maturing adults and dancers, wish to be treated better by society then we must champion the change that we want to see. We must stand up and tell our own stories of our experiences and love of dance.

In his discussion of the meaning behind the African proverb referred to above, Chinua Achebe stated that it is every person's responsibility to tell their own story. This "is something we have to do, so that the story of the hunt will also reflect the agony, the

travail—the bravery, even, of the lions” (Achebe, quoted in Brooks, 1994, para. 11). The lived experiences of the six maturing dancers in this study are evidence of the agony and bravery referred to by Achebe. We are the lions in this proverb. It is time that we stood up as a community to challenge those who choose to oppress us and to advocate for change. As de Beauvoir (1948/2015) reminded her readers, collective awareness-raising and resistance are the pathways to freedom.

Until maturing women and men speak out, the power and the storytelling will always reside with those who benefit from our oppression. In the case of ballet and western theatrical dance, if we do not challenge the message that the youthful body is the only body of value, maturing adults will always be the marginalised other. We have an obligation to ensure that the narrow and immanent stereotypes of femininity and masculinity are overturned. By telling the stories of our dancing identities, we will ensure that future generations of dancers do not experience the negative health and wellbeing impacts that authoritarian pedagogies have had on many of us.

Maturing recreational dancers have another obligation stemming from our roles as community elders and culture bearers. We have a responsibility to record our stories, images, and histories of dance participation for future generations. Our world of adult ballet and dance is fragile. Most of the voices of maturing recreational dancers documented in the literature review for this study were hidden in newspaper articles and in letters to the editor published in dance journals. In New Zealand, the stories, images and voices of maturing recreational dancers appear most frequently in news articles and current affairs programmes. These were found when searching the National Library catalogue and subscription-only news databases. During the restructuring of the media outlets in 2024, some of the key recordings and stories of dancers and adult dance

practices were removed from the internet. If we do not take ownership of writing and recording our own histories, there will be no legacy to pass on to future dancers.

7.5.2 Recommendations for teachers and maturing professional dancers

The literature suggests that ageing and retirement from performing on the stage have negative health and wellbeing impacts for professional dancers (Dean, 2023; Markula, Jeffrey, Nikolai, & Deol, 2023; Schwaiger, 2005; York-Pryce, 2020, 2023). Like recreational dancers, teachers and professionals need to take responsibility for challenging the systemic ageism which permeates all aspects of dance culture and renders them as other and incongruent. Markula, Jeffrey, Nikolai, & Deol (2023) revealed that this can be done but it requires dancers to critically examine their deeply embodied beliefs about maturing and self-worth. Along with resisting and advocating for change in attitudes to ageing, teachers and professionals need to be critical of their pedagogical choices and the messages these convey to children and adult learners. As de Beauvoir (1948/2015, p. 73) noted, “to will oneself free is also to will others free.” It is no longer acceptable to be passive and complicit in this situation.

7.5.3 Recommendations for national dance organisations and schools

Dance practitioners in New Zealand need to ask themselves a key question: Will ballet survive? According to the official statistics, New Zealand birth rates have been decreasing since 2013 and 2023 marked the lowest annual increase in births since the 1940s (Statistics New Zealand, 2024). The New Zealand population is ageing quickly. This is a trend which is expected to continue into the future (Statistics New Zealand, 2022c). If ballet is to survive as a performing art and recreational activity, national organisations and dance schools in New Zealand will need to adapt to expected changes in demographics. This will require broadening their focus and increasing the provision of

dance classes catering to adults across the lifespan. Teacher training programmes will also need to respond to demographic changes by including safe adult dance pedagogies and practice into their curricula. Dance organisations and schools need to urgently re-evaluate their philosophies, attitudes to adults, and their internal and external messaging around ballet and maturing bodies.

7.6 Recommendations for further research

This section offers five recommendations for research that will provide researchers and stakeholder organisations with much needed data on the adult recreational dance sector in New Zealand. This information will be useful for planning adult recreational dance provision and will help address key issues such as improving teacher training to meet the needs of an ageing and increasingly diverse population.

7.6.1 Mapping existing provision of adult ballet in New Zealand

To set future research agendas and target advocacy efforts, we need to know who is teaching, in which contexts and localities this provision is taking place, the characteristics of provision, and who are the learners of adult ballet and recreational dance genres. The DANZ survey summarised in Kopytko (2015) is nearly 10 years old. The landscape of recreational dance and performing arts in New Zealand has changed.

In 2018, as part of the preparation for this study, I undertook an informal scan of the internet and the Facebook social media platform to identify dance schools offering adult recreational ballet classes. These searches revealed a small number of dance schools predominantly located in the cities and larger urban areas of the North Island. Provision in the South Island seemed to focus on a handful of schools in Christchurch, Dunedin, Nelson, and Wanaka. There appeared to be a great deal of variability in the number of

classes advertised, the class level, and the information provided on the school websites regarding class content, teacher qualification, and the expectations of prospective dancers. These searches also revealed some significant inconsistencies in the way dance learning opportunities are advertised to adults. It was not uncommon to find that schools known to teach adult ballet did not advertise these classes on their websites or through social media.

This lack of information on local provision reflects the wider knowledge gaps around adult ballet offerings and learner population size in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Mapping provision in New Zealand will assist recreational dance providers plan and better target their provision, and will help adults find dance classes in their local area.

7.6.2 “It’s me, the teacher and that’s all that matters” (Abigail)

The findings of this study revealed that adult recreational ballet dancers have close relationships with their teachers. Aside from the work of Hills and Snook (2023) and Graham (2023), and brief mentions in the grey literature, we know very little about the pedagogical orientations and practices of teachers of adult recreational ballet and dance. We know even less about their experiences of ageing and how this is influenced by their work with adult learners. Illuminating the experiences of teaching and being with maturing adults will assist dance organisations and teachers to identify best practice and improve the quality of service provision.

7.6.3 Why do adults leave recreational ballet classes?

The narratives of dancers and their teachers do not seem to mention classmates and learners who leave ballet. The study by Kraus (2020) was the only research identified

which specifically focused on the reasons why adults abandon recreational dance. Kraus's participants cited social, psychological, physical, and health reasons for leaving belly dancing. Kraus suggested that understanding why people leave leisure activities may assist training providers and teachers identify aspects of their practice that are not fit for purpose and make improvements (Kraus, 2020). This raises the question: Are there practices and beliefs in ballet that are detrimental to the health and wellbeing of maturing adults? Given ballet's historically poor relationship with body image, and the persistence within ballet of ageism and negative stereotypes of femininity, this question is something that should be a research priority.

7.6.4 What are the experiences of adults from diverse backgrounds?

The popular stereotype of ballet is of dancers who are middle-class, European and heterosexual. Hill et al. (2016), Scott (2021), Shen (2020), and Shen and Rowe (2023) provided evidence that adults from diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, sexuality, and culture attend recreational ballet classes. However, we know little about the experiences and meanings that these populations ascribe to the social and physical practices of dance. Shen (2020) and Shen and Rowe (2023) found that Asian migrants in New Zealand use recreational dance for acculturation and their sense of belonging and self-esteem are tied directly to the progression of dance technique and having their progress validated by teacher and classmates. The experiences described by Shen and by Shen and Rowe are very different to those of the maturing dancers in this study. If we wish to understand who is in our dance classrooms, future research needs to focus on diversity.

7.6.5 How are age and ageing constructed by recreational dancers?

This study did not reveal any significant differences in how women of different decades experienced ballet. As highlighted in Sport New Zealand (2016), each age group has different needs and interests. If we are to cater for adults across the lifespan then research needs to focus on identifying how recreational dance can meet and support these needs.

This is a research question where using a blended methodology would be an advantage. Understanding perceptions of ageing and the experiences of being aged in western society is complex and multi-layered. A blended methodology such as the one used in this study could unpick the different aspects of the experience. For example, de Beauvoir (1949/1993, 1970/1972) could help in looking at the social construction of age and age categories from the perspective of men and women. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2002, 1964/1968) could assist in understanding the role of reciprocity in the acceptance or denial of socially prescribed age categories by maturing persons. Goffman (1959, 1963b) may be used to look at how individuals express their age within communities or social groups. A more accurate reflection of ageing could be gathered by probing bodily experience, listening to the words of the participants, and being attentive to the language of their bodies.

7.7 Final personal reflections

In the final section of this thesis, I would like to offer some personal reflections. Of the many learnings from this study, these are the most meaningful to me. Engaging in this study and delving into the lived experiences of dancing while maturing changed my view of myself as a dancer and a teacher. I have also become curious about other ways of exploring the embodied experiences of dancing and the meanings of dance in the lives

of ballet teachers. This thesis concludes with a final reflection on why the eyes of maturing recreational ballet dancers always seem to twinkle.

7.7.1 Learning to love my dance again

I have always had an awkward relationship with ballet. Listening to the dancers' interviews and reading their transcripts, I sometimes felt embarrassed by my two left feet, my inability to follow my teachers' instructions, and my socialised assumption that my body is more suited to a CrossFit box than a tutu. I have tried to leave ballet several times but always I come back. Like the maturing women in this study, ballet is part of me and I am part of it. We are intimately intertwined in a way that is difficult to explain. Leaving dance would be like leaving a part of myself behind. I can no more leave ballet than a fish can leave water.

7.7.2 Learning to listen in my teaching practice

The study had an unexpected impact on my everyday pedagogical practices. I am a teaching librarian in a tertiary institution in New Zealand. I teach database research and information literacy skills to adult learners in health and other disciplines. Through reflecting on my experiences of interviewing, I have come to realise that I need to make space for the silences when interacting with others. I realised during Natalia's interview that I am sometimes an impatient person. I realised that as a teacher my role is to offer adult learners opportunities for transcendence and freedom. I cannot do that when I am too hasty for the answers. I realised that van Manen (1997, p. 114) was correct – these moments of silence are becomings and pregnant with the infinite possibilities of "being or life itself". I am no longer afraid of the silences. They are not a mark of shame on me or my learners. The silences are where the magic can happen. When teaching, I now

wait and give in to gravity. When I do this I find that the most interesting things happen and learners' eyes begin to twinkle just like they do in the ballet studio.

7.7.3 Where to from here ... or the things I am curious about

This study demonstrated the value of using a phenomenological approach to explore the emotional and bodily experiences of dancing while maturing. While reflecting over the course of this study, other questions surfaced and remained unanswered. These relate to the potential offered by appreciative inquiry, the value of further exploring dance as embodied knowing (Barbour, 2004, 2018a), and the lived experiences of adult ballet teachers. I would like to explore these further after this thesis is completed.

I am curious to explore how an appreciative inquiry methodology combined with perceptual phenomenology might be used to enhance the experiences of recreational ballet education for maturing dancers and their teachers. Focusing on the positive aspects of dancing while maturing may have beneficial impacts on the wellbeing of dancers and teachers. This may produce insights into pedagogy and practice that could potentially be transferable to the young adult vocational and recreational dance education contexts.

I am also curious to further my understandings of maturing recreational ballet dancers' "embodied ways of knowing" (Barbour, 2018b, p. 221) and how they "creatively adapt personal beliefs and behaviours in order to resolve the tensions inherent in living in a Western context" (Barbour, 2004, p. 235). Delving into this question may provide practical strategies that maturing dancers and teachers may use to mitigate the negative impacts of ageing and gender stereotypes that permeate western theatrical dance. The

learnings from this may be of interest to practitioners who work in the adult sport, active recreation, and leisure sectors.

As a maturing recreational ballet dancer, I have become increasingly curious about adult ballet teachers and their lived experiences of maturing while dancing. The teacher's presence is threaded throughout the dancers' stories in this thesis and the learner voices in the literature. Intimately and inseparably intertwined, dancers and teachers watch each other across the interworld of the flesh. The teacher's touch leaves imprints on the maturing dancer's soul, identity, and memories. These imprints last a lifetime, and the dancers are forever changed by this connection. Yet we know so little about who our teachers are, their lived experiences of ageing, and the meanings they derive from their contact with us. Do adult recreational ballet teachers experience the same joy and pleasure as their learners do? What would the experiences of maturing dance teachers look like when viewed through the perspectives of affirmative ageing (Sandberg, 2013), perceptual (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1993, 1964/1968) and existential phenomenology (de Beauvoir 1949/1993, 1970/1972)? These are some of the many questions I have that remain unanswered.

7.7.4 Dancing for joy while dancing ourselves whole again

This study began with a question: Why do the eyes of maturing recreational ballet dancers always seem to twinkle? As with any question around the nature of being and phenomenology, there is no single clear answer. However, I can say that from this study we may have new insights into maturing dancing being.

When we dance our eyes may twinkle because we are immersed in joy and pleasure. We may have found a pathway to transcendence and freedom. We may feel beautiful,

comfortable, or at ease with ourselves. We may have reduced feelings of pain or move better because of dancing. We may have found a way to alleviate symptoms of depression or feelings of loneliness and social isolation. We may enjoy the challenge of learning new movements and expanding our knowledge of dance and ourselves. We may have made new friends who share our passion. We may enjoy dancing in the company of others. We may look forward to the social gathering after class. We may just enjoy dancing for the sake of dancing.

Whatever the reason is that our eyes twinkle, we can be reasonably certain of several things. Ballet, like other dance genres, offers adults creative ways of coping with the social and physical changes that come with ageing. Dance is beneficial for our health and wellbeing. As strongly suggested by dancers in this thesis, recreational ballet and other dance genres offer maturing women a way of dancing ourselves whole again.

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Glossary

Adult ballet learner	A learner who is engaged in learning ballet as an adult (Gerhard, 2014).
Adult learner	A learner who is legally defined as an adult and has developed a “a self-concept of being responsible for our own lives, of being self directing” (Knowles et al., 2020, p. 43). Adult learner and adult ballet learner are used in the thesis to mean the same thing.
Allégro	“A term applied to all brisk and bright movements. All steps of elevation such as the entrechat, cabriole, assemblé, jeté”. These steps are characterised by “lightness, smoothness and ballon” (Grant, 1982, p. 2).
En pointe (sur les pointes)	A common term used for sur les pointes. To go “on the points [sic]. The raising of the body on the tips of the toes.” (Grant, 1982, p. 89).
Grand battement	A battement is defined as “beating. A beating action of the extended or bent leg” (Grant, 1982, p. 15). A grand battement is a “large battement. An exercise in which the working leg is raised from the hip into the air and brought down again” (Grant, 1982, p. 15).
Pirouette	“Whirl or spin. A complete turn of the body on one foot, on point [sic] or demi-pointe” (Grant, 1982, p. 84).
Plié	“Bent, bending. A bending of the knee or knees ... there are two principal pliés: grand pliés or full bending of the knees ... and demi-plié or half-bending of the knees” (Grant, 1982, p. 88).

Adult ballet learner	A learner who is engaged in learning ballet as an adult (Gerhard, 2014).
Pointe shoes	“Specifically designed shoes which allow the dancer to support her body weight on the tips of the feet, in order to perform movements included in the <i>Sur La Pointe</i> section of a class” (Ryman, 2007, p. 60).
Pointe work	“A category of movements performed by the female dancer ... point work is the ultimate achievement for the female dancer, the culmination of her classical training, which brings a further dimension to her dancing” (Ryman, 2007, p. 60).

Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics approval



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH)

Auckland University of Technology
 D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
 T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
 E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

AUT

TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
 O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

1 December 2020

Jennifer Nikolai
 Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences

Dear Jennifer

Re Ethics Application: **20/388 The lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes.**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTECH).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 1 December 2023.

Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

1. Please replace references to anonymity in the Information Sheet and Consent Form with confidentiality.

Non-standard conditions must be completed before commencing your study. Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTECH before commencing your study.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTECH in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTECH prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTECH Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.

AUTECH grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any [enquiries](#) please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTECH Secretariat
 Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: steph.clout@aut.ac.nz; Valerie.Wright-St.Clair@aut.ac.nz; sue.mcnaughton@aut.ac.nz; Sally.rae@aut.ac.nz

**Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee
(AUTEC)**

2 July 2024

Jennifer Nikolai
Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences

Dear Jennifer

Re: Ethics Application: **20/388 The lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes.**

Thank you for your notification of the minor changes to the public facing documents.

These have been noted as your annual progress report.

We look forward to receiving your completion report once your thesis has been submitted

All forms are available online <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

For any enquiries, please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: steph.clout@aut.ac.nz; sue.monaughton@aut.ac.nz; Sally.rae@aut.ac.nz

Appendix B: Participant information sheet



Participant Information Sheet

Date Information Sheet Produced:

26th October 2020

Project Title

The lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes.

An Invitation

Hi, my name is Steph Clout. I'm a librarian at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and a maturing recreational ballet dancer. I danced as a child and returned to ballet classes as a 45-year-old. In doing so I rediscovered the joy of dancing and joined a growing community of maturing women who love to dance.

Thank you for contacting me and expressing interest in this research. I would like to invite you to participate in a project investigating the experiences of maturing New Zealand women who dance ballet for recreation. This project aims to discover why you (and I) dance, what ballet means to you, and how being a dancer has contributed to your health, wellbeing and attitudes to ageing.

Your participation in this project may help promote dance as a valid recreational activity for maturing women, may help raise awareness of the benefits of dancing across the lifespan, and may contribute to increased provision of dance learning opportunities in New Zealand and overseas.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this project is to contribute to our understanding of why recreational ballet dancing is valued by New Zealand women. No academic research has been undertaken into our experiences of dance participation. The meaning and impact of ballet on our health and wellbeing is largely undocumented. Sharing your experiences of dancing will help grow knowledge in this area and may help raise awareness of the benefits of ballet for maturing adults. Promoting recreational dance, particularly ballet, as an alternative to traditional sport and fitness may also provide an avenue to increasing physical activity and wellbeing for New Zealand women.

This research project is being conducted as part of my doctoral qualification through AUT. The findings of this research may be used for academic publications and presentations.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have received this information sheet because you contacted me in response to an invitation to participate. You have met the following inclusion criteria and are warmly invited to take part in this research:

- Self-identify as female.
- Aged 35 years old and over.
- Have participated continuously in ballet classes for one year or more.
- Studying ballet in an urban or rural dance school in the community or private sector in the North Island of New Zealand.
- Conversational English speaker.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

If you wish to participate in this research project please contact me by telephone or email. You will need to complete and sign a participant consent form. Your consent form should be returned to me by email, post or in person prior to the interview.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice). Whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from this project at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the project, you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

Participating in this project may take up to three hours of your time. Your participation will involve an interview and reading your own story.

You will be asked to take part in a face-to-face in-depth interview of up to two hours duration. This interview will happen at a place and time of your choosing. Before the interview we will review the consent form together, talk about the project and answer any questions you may have.

During this interview I will invite you to share stories about your experiences of dance and being a dancer. I will ask you a few questions to help prompt your thoughts. You will do most of the talking. You will determine what stories you tell me and how much detail you include. Your stories and experiences will be treated with respect. The interview will be audio-recorded and I will take written notes. Your interview will be transcribed and edited to remove interview questions, repetitions and any factual details that may identify you.

Here are examples of the types of interview question I may ask you:

How long have you been dancing? Tell me more about being a dancer!

What is the bodily experience of dance like for you? (How do you feel physically and emotionally when you dance?)

How does the presence of other people in the studio influence the way you dance?

How has dancing influenced your feelings and beliefs about ageing, health and wellbeing?

How do you feel maturing ballet learners are viewed by the dance world?

Links to the publications and presentations from this research will also be sent to you.

COVID-19

If New Zealand moves to COVID-19 Level 2 or higher at the time your interview is scheduled, you will have the option of delaying your interview until Level 1 or being interviewed via Internet video call.

Your interview will be recorded and the audio will be transcribed by the researcher for use in the research findings and publications. This recording will not be made available to anyone other than the researcher and supervisors. The recording of your interview will be deleted once transcription has been completed.

What are the discomforts and risks?

No dancing is expected during the interview. It is unlikely that you will experience discomfort or risks from participation in this project.

What are the benefits?

By participating in this project:

- You will have an opportunity to share your stories and love of dance with a wider audience.
- You may gain a better understanding of why you dance and the benefits of dancing to your health and wellbeing.
- You may feel encouraged to continue dancing.
- Your stories may encourage other maturing women to take up dancing.
- Your stories may help challenge the stereotypes about ageing and society's expectations of maturing adults.

What information will you collect about me?

As part of this research, I will collect the follow information from you:

- Your name, age, length of time spent dancing, the city/town you live in, and the city/town you dance in.
- Your story about dance and being a dancer.

Your information will become part of the story of adult ballet in New Zealand. Your demographic data will provide background on the age range of dancers and the provision of learning opportunities in rural and urban New Zealand. This and your story will become part of the research findings and publications.

Will I be identified in this research?

Complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. New Zealand has a small population of maturing adult recreational ballet dancers and only a handful of dance schools offer adult ballet classes. There is a possibility that your classmates, friends or family may be able to identify you from the research findings.

How will my privacy be protected?

I will do my very best to ensure that your confidentiality and privacy are respected. Your personal details and the name of your school will be removed from the interview transcript and will not appear in the research publications. A pseudonym will be used to identify your contribution to the research.

Your personal details will be stored on a password protected computer, in a password protected file on the AUT secure server. Your personal details will not be shared with a third party. The project transcripts will be stored in a secure locked filing cabinet at AUT. Only myself and my primary supervisor will have access to the transcripts.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

I anticipate that you will give a total of three hours of your time to this project. You will take part in an interview of up to two hours duration. You will spend up to one hour reading your story and project publications. A gift / koha of a \$50.00 petrol or food voucher will be offered to you as compensation for your time.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You will have a total of twenty-one days to respond to the invitation and ask questions. A follow up reminder will be sent to you after twenty-one days. If I don't hear from you, I will assume that you are not interested in participating and I will not contact you again.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Your stories will be shared (with pseudonyms) in the thesis, and in future academic publications and oral presentations.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Jennifer Nikolai, jennifer.nikolai@aut.ac.nz, and (+649) 921 9999

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, ethics@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Steph Clout, steph.clout@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999 x 6364

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Jennifer Nikolai, jennifer.nikolai@aut.ac.nz, (+649) 921 9999

Dr Sue McNaughton, smmncn@outlook.co.nz

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *December 1st 2020*, AUTEK Reference number *20/388*.

Appendix C: Consent form



Appendix C: Consent Form

Project title: *The lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in adult recreational ballet classes.*

Project Supervisor: *Dr Jennifer Nikolai and Dr Sue McNaughton*

Researcher: *Steph Clout*

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 26th October 2020.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- I understand that all research materials will be destroyed six years after the commencement of the research
- I understand that complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.
- I understand that any information I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and supervisors, my name will not be used in the published results, and that no opinions will be attributed to me in any way that will identify me.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes No

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on December 1st 2020 AUTEK Reference number 20/388

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix D: Recruitment advertisement



RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

The lived experiences of maturing New Zealand women who participate in recreational ballet classes

Hi, my name is Steph Clout. I'm a librarian at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and a maturing recreational ballet dancer. I danced as a child and returned to ballet classes as a 45-year-old. In doing so I rediscovered the joy of dancing and joined a growing community of women who love to dance. I would like to invite you to participate in a project investigating the experiences of maturing women who dance ballet for recreation.

Project aims

This project aims to discover why maturing women become dancers, what ballet means to us, and how being a dancer contributes to our health, wellbeing and attitudes to ageing.

This project may help promote dance as a valid recreational activity for maturing women, may raise awareness of the benefits of dancing across the lifespan, and may contribute to increased provision of dance learning opportunities for adults in New Zealand and overseas.

Participation involves

- One interview (1-2 hours) at a time and place of your choosing
- Your stories will be shared (with pseudonyms) in the thesis, and in future academic publications and oral presentations.

Eligibility criteria

- Self-identify as female
- Aged 35 years old and over
- Have taken ballet classes for one year or more
- Conversational English speaker



More information

Please contact if you are interested in participating or have questions:

- Email: steph.clout@aut.ac.nz
- Telephone: 09 921-9999 extension 6364

Participation in this research is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time. A \$50.00 voucher will be offered to participants.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on December 1st 2020 AUTEK Reference number 20/388

Appendix E: Interview guide (with example questions)

Introductions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project

Offer koha

Review the consent form and PIS

Participant to confirm their name, contact details, age and geographic location - live and dance

The process - open questions, you will do most of the talking, about experience of this thing we call ballet and dance - questions about the physical, emotional and social experiences of dancing.

Warm up (lived time - past, present and future come together)

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
2. What do you remember about your first interactions with ballet?
3. How did you become a ballet dancer?

The studio (lived body, lived space)

4. Tell me how you prepare for a ballet class?
5. What happens when you put on your ballet uniform?
6. How does the ballet studio make you feel physically and emotionally?

The experience of dancing while maturing (lived body, lived human relations, ideals versus realities)

7. Tell me about what and who you see when you look in the mirror when dancing?
8. What do you see your body doing? (facial expressions, perceptual responses)

9. Tell me about how you learn new dance steps and choreography? How do you get ballet into your body? How do teach your body to do new things?
10. When you watch your teacher in class - what do you notice about her body and her movements?
11. How do you feel when you are following your teacher directions in class?

Dancing with others (lived body, lived human relations)

12. How does the presence of other people in class influence the way you dance and the way you feel about dance in general?
13. Do you learn from each other? We talk about learning from our teachers, but do you learn from your fellow dancers?
14. Have you been in classes where that vibe hasn't been there? How does it feel?

The dance world (lived body, lived human relations)

15. What advice or messages would you give maturing adults who would like to dance
16. What advice or messages would you give to the dance world? (think: legacy)
17. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Conclusion of interview