



I DON'T WANNA DANCE ALONE!

Outcomes
Evaluation
Report

August 2023



Evaluation Acknowledgements

Thank you to the members of I Don't Wanna Dance Alone for sharing your experiences to support this evaluation.

This evaluation was carried out by Amanda Hunter from Outcomes Hub.

General Acknowledgements

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I Don't Wanna Dance Alone was made possible through the Asian Artists Fund awarded through Foundation North and Creative New Zealand.



INTRODUCTION.

I Don't Wanna Dance Alone

"I Don't Wanna Dance Alone" is a community contemporary dance development exploring themes of community, intergenerational dynamics and empowering the inner child. The work celebrates the joy of movement and connection through an all ages, all Asian cast of 12 people from diverse dance backgrounds. The work was facilitated by Cindy Yunha Jang-Barlow of Jang Huddle, a moving collective that aims to enhance diverse stories through movement and art collaborations.

Ten initial workshops were held across the Auckland region, (North Shore, East, Central and South Auckland). There were 70 participants who signed up to the workshops online through email or Instagram. Participants were aged between ten and sixty years old and identified as a range different Asian ethnicities.

Following the initial workshops, participants were invited to take part in the development of a show to be presented to the wider community. This is intended to be a work in progress with a goal of showing the work to wider audiences across Aotearoa. The final performance was choreographed with performers to an original soundtrack by Rewind Fields. There were four shows held at The Factory Theatre Onehunga in April 2023.

Methodology

This evaluation was carried out by independent evaluation consultancy Outcomes Hub. Project participants were invited to take part in one of two 90-minute group interviews in Auckland. There were twelve group interview participants in total. During the group interviews, participants shared their first impressions, experienced developing and performing the work and the broader outcomes they experienced as a result of participating in this project.





EXPLORE.



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Participants learned about the project through a number of channels, ranging from social media advertising through to personal relationships with the facilitator. The most common way that participants found the project was through Instagram advertising and promotion through dance and arts based social media pages. The promotion of I Don't Wanna Dance Alone struck many of the participants as exciting and unique. One participant described liking that the project was a call out to Asian diaspora individuals and feeling that this could be a way to connect with other Asians in their community.

For others, the project presented an opportunity to learn a new hobby or extend their skills in dance in an environment that is more relaxed and welcoming than a traditional dance class. Some participants saw the classes as an opportunity to get out of the house and inject more movement into their lives. Despite the varying reasons that individuals signed up, all agreed that they weren't sure what to expect from the project and entered into it with open minds.

“I thought “why not” I don't know what I was expecting, just that it would be an exploration of movement in a community space. The community aspect brought me to it, I thought oh cool there will be people from different ages. I thought it would be good to mix and mingle with other Asians of different ages.”

“My expectation was doing more exercise because I work on a computer every day, standing in front of a computer. I saw this workshop and thought, this will be fun, and I will have more energy! I wanted to move my body.”

Participants described the first few sessions as being a mixture of nerves and excitement as they got to know each other and become comfortable in the space. There was a strong focus on community building and creating an atmosphere that was unstructured and low-pressure. One participant spoke about these introductory sessions putting her at ease as she was initially skeptical about the programmes ability to deliver on it's promises of being “non-elitist” and truly “community-based”.

“As I read a bit more about it and joined the first few sessions I felt it was a nice comfortable space. People were like me, not so sure what was going on, but we were all taking a plunge into something new.”

The groups spent the first sessions exploring the space and movement through a variety of activities. In these sessions there were opportunities for group members to connect with their own bodies and explore notions of consent in sharing spaces with others. Participants also spoke to the importance of these sessions in breaking down barriers. One person remembered coming together with the other groups and feeling threatened by the idea of how skilled or experienced the others would be. For this participant, these sessions helped to break down these ideas of what it means to be worthy of occupying a space through dance.

“I remember the first workshop I went to we were given a task to pair up and we had an activity that we would act out and there is that notion of consent, like I might touch your shoulders like this. It was about finding the comfort zone.”

“Initially I was expecting more of a workshop style thing with technical conditioning, but it was a different experience for me, it was more like playing. Imagine this is what you are doing and just go with the music. It’s quite different from my learning experience in dance. This was a bit more explorative.”

Participants believed that an important factor in creating a safe and welcoming space was the easy-going nature of the programme facilitator. Participants described her as “humble”, “selfless” and “likeable”. One participant shared that she had serious doubts about her own place in the group during the first sessions, believing that she wasn’t a good enough dancer to take part. For this participant it was the positive and encouraging nature of the facilitator that put her at ease and encouraged her to continue. Another participant spoke about feeling inspired by the facilitator and her ability to bring together a diverse group of people and share the joy of dance.

“The first time I met the facilitator I was asking myself, 'can I do this... can I dance? Is she lying to me?' But after the rehearsals and practices, she made me feel like I can do it. I was so nervous and she would tell me not to worry – she made me feel like I can do this!”

"She never showed her stress even at times when she should have been stressed. I think that's an important quality to have as a leader. I'm really inspired by what she has done and it's made me think... wow, I could bring people together like this."



DEVELOP.



DEVELOP.

As the project continued, participants were invited to take part in the development of a showcase to be put on for friends, family, and the wider community. With hindsight, participants agreed that this was an exciting and effective way to develop a piece of work that they had genuine ownership of and felt proud to share. However, at times, this process could feel disorientating and mysterious. One member described this process as “a puzzle” and another agreed that at times the group were left wondering where everything was going to fit. For those who took part in the design process, having an approaching date locked in was important in bringing the material together into a cohesive product. One participant remembers the moment that the facilitator brought in a large piece of paper to visually map out the concepts as the moment that things really started to come together.

“It was a slow process, and it was different to what I’m used to. It was very raw and about building it up slowly and seeing how it takes. It was an amazing end product so.. yeah.. but we didn’t know until a couple of weeks before the show that it was actually solid.”

“I think it was helpful to have an approaching show date for the performance because it encouraged us to be more serious about it. Most of the process was quite aspirational – but eventually it set in that we were going to be putting on a show that our friends and family would see. That was quite good motivation for me.”

An important factor in the development of the final show, was the sense of ownership that participants had over the piece. It was not always immediately obvious to group members, how the work that they were doing in their sessions would be turned into parts of a production, or if they would be used in the final show at all. One participant recalled taking part in a poetry workshop and not expecting this to form a part of the development only to be pleasantly surprised to find that the facilitator had taken the time to turn what they had worked on into movement for the show.

Another participant described an exercise where the group moved in circles in different ways, and remembered wondering if the activity was just for fun or if it would be a part of the performance. She felt that the exercises were a great way to organically create and develop without pressure or a need to perfect things on the spot. Working in this way created an environment where the participants felt safe to contribute and co-create. Everyone agreed that the final product was a piece unique to them and their own creative journey.

“I think really trusting the process. She would kind of trust us and encourage us to explore space. It was fun because she used all of the things that seemed insignificant as steppingstones to bring it all together – she had a real eye for detail.”

“I’ve got some videos of the early sessions and you could see that the earlier moves that we came up with made their way through to the development stage. I think it helped to have things recorded throughout. It was nice to see the documentation of the process. It’s hard to describe a movement piece without recording it. It was nice to see it unfold organically.”

For some, the development process created a space to explore themes and issues that were important to participants. One participant shared a story about the space that this project created for her to explore her relationship with her parents and the catharsis she felt through the development process:

“A personal takeaway is about our spoken word piece. The facilitator’s instructions were really abstract, she gave us some key words and told us to have fun with it. I wrote about my relationship with my family which is not very great. I don’t have the best relationship with my parents and for me it was really cathartic to be able to do a piece like that. Having that accepted into the piece really organically was great – we wrote it and combined it and the facilitator choreographed to it.”



SHARE.



SHARE.

Performing on a stage was familiar for some, but relatively new for most of the participants in this project. Regardless of experience level, most participants were surprised to find that they weren't as nervous to perform as they expected. Some of the factors that contributed this ease were the sense of community and support that participants felt was built within the group and the understanding that mistakes were not detrimental to the performance, but rather a part of the journey.

“I get real performance anxiety. It didn't really come up for me because I was just trying to remind myself that this is just what we've been doing all along. I was surprised that I didn't freak out or forget a move. I felt really helped when the mentors came and gave feedback. I felt held by the group and the process.”

“This wasn't my first time performing on a stage, but it was my first time performing such a long piece. I think I got more comfortable playing with each show, I did something a little bit differently and I felt able to do that, comfortably. With previous shows I've done in the past it was about doing everything perfectly, but this was really different to that. I wasn't stressed because I didn't have to worry about making a mistake.”

Participants had different understandings of what the performances meant to them. For some it was an opportunity to share the skills and learning they experienced with their friends and family, for others it was a continuation of spending time with a group that they had built such a strong relationship with. One participant described the final shows as a way to convey the sense of joy that was collectively experienced through the project.

“I think what really hit me too was that space for community to come in. I had never invited that many friends to something that was that personal to me and that I'm proud of. I said come to this dance show, I really believe in this kaupapa. That's a part of what community means to me, being able to invite people into your world and to share that with other people.”



OUTCOMES.



OUTCOMES.

By far the most significant outcome for participants was the sense of belonging and community that the project helped to build. Participants spoke about gaining connections and friendships that continued beyond the classroom. The groups would often exercise together, share food together and during graduation season many of the participants attended and celebrated together. One participant described being surprised by how different all of the group members were, but how connected they became through their shared love of the project and of the arts.

“When you’re part of a dance show like thing, it’s important to hang out outside of that as well. Us sharing food together was an important part of bonding and sharing food was an important tool for bonding and creating close friendships.”

For many participants, this project was an opportunity to build friendships and connections beyond their usual circles. One young participant shared how inspired she was seeing those who were five years older in the group graduate university and compared this to having older siblings. Some senior members of the group also shared stories of enjoying the company of the younger group members and feeling proud to be able to call them their friends. For one member, this was particularly valuable as she missed the company of her own children who had moved overseas.

“Last week my friend asked me, who is she, she is your daughters’ friend? I said no, that’s my friend. She said, “oh your friends are so young”. I went to her graduation and took a photo with her. None of my colleagues believed she was my friend. I told my daughter I have made so many friends and she’s jealous of me.”

“When I was on the way home I would think “oh my gosh I might have said something wrong” because of this generation gap. They are so young, I feel like a mum. I can’t help but feel like I’m nagging. Our relationship was just so good. I would say these are all my kids because my kids are overseas.”

Connection with culture was another important outcome for participants in the project. Participants reflected on the original call for Asian diaspora individuals and how intriguing and interesting this was to them. One participant described breaking down some of the barriers that he had previously experienced in connecting with his culture and exploring his own identity.

“I also had a sense of being open and embracing my own identity in a way. One of the things at the centre of this show and this process is our Asian diaspora. For me, I’ve been putting that off for a long time, I’ve felt ashamed.”

“I guess moving to New Zealand as a teenager at a young age, I felt like I didn’t connect well with where I was from. In recent years I have tried to make an effort to reconnect, and this has definitely helped with that. This community and a place to go to is something I’ve gained from this.”

Participants also spoke about learning to let go and be comfortable with ambiguity – a skill that they were able to take into their day-to-day lives. One participant described this as giving himself “permission to play”. He shared that it was very different to the structured environments he was used to, and noted that this was “a key moment” in his life where he was able to just enjoy movement without having to know the outcome.

“I learned to embrace the unknown because I am aware that I’m quite a structured person and I don’t tend to like change and anything that is unclear. I learned through this process that it’s totally okay to have things that are abstract and raw. We ended up having such a good show.”

Finally, the project provided a fun and engaging respite from everyday life for many participants. For some this was a hobby, for others it was a moment of joy amid what has been a very difficult year with weather events and for some personal challenges.

“For this project, with all the things happening in my life, each month I had a disaster. My back, my car was stolen. The flooding, my unit was flooded. I had a surgery. It seemed like it would never finish. But I remember, luckily, I had this commitment which was a support for my spirit.”

AUDIENCE FEEDBACK.

"Nice to see an age range of the cast and a range of dance styles. Doing it for the love of dancing/performing. Spoken Word with video track touches on serious issues of body worth."

"I connected especially with the final piece, and the dancer throughout who represented the inner child."

"I love the translations! I LOVED that the cast was all ages. I loved that it took itself seriously but in a fun kind of way. I enjoyed that I knew people in it so it felt homely. I loved the costumes. I connected with the meal scene. TRUST THE PROCESS. RELY ON THE COLLECTIVE!! Learning to be comfortable with the discomfort. Unlearn stereotypes, just have fun. A good core memory."

"My favourites were the dinner scene. The dinner scene made me think of my family dinners and the dance after; I liked how the dancers had their own routines but still flowed together. I also liked the music in it and how it cut in and out."

"I loved the strong intergenerational themes - really spoke to me as an Asian person living in diaspora. Also loved to see more elementary contemporary dancers having fun in a safe space - makes me want to get involved! I was initially worried, as someone who had not often enjoyed a contemporary dance, that I wouldn't "understand" some of the work. But I felt all of it was super engaging, accessible and beautiful. It made me think about generational trauma - what we pass down."

"I loved how the music & the dance flowed freely. It felt like the dancers and the music were responding to each other. I don't think I've ever seen music and dance connect so well before."

CONCLUSIONS.

I Don't Wanna Dance Alone is a contemporary dance development that sought to explore themes of community and celebrate the joy of movement and connection through an all ages, all Asian cast of people from diverse dance backgrounds. This evaluation was commissioned to capture the journey and development of *I Don't Wanna Dance Alone* and understand the broader outcomes achieved through this mahi.

Participants were drawn to the project for a range of reasons which included wanting to learn about dance, connect with other Asians, make friends and become more active. Regardless of the reasons that individuals signed up, all agreed that they weren't initially sure what to expect from the project. While the experience was nerve-wracking at first, participants agreed that the welcoming environment and warmth of the facilitator put everyone at ease as they got to know each other and explore the space.

Participants found the relaxed, shared approach to developing the show exciting and agreed that it was an effective way to create a piece that felt like their own. However, at times, this process could feel disorientating. For those who took part in the design process, having an approaching date locked in was important in bringing the material together into a cohesive product. Ultimately, participants felt this process was enjoyable and true to the ethos of community co-creation.

When it came to performing, participants were excited to share what they had learnt and experienced with their friends and families. Participants spoke about feeling at ease thanks to the sense of community and support that they felt was built within the group and the understanding that mistakes were not detrimental to the performance, but rather a part of the journey.

By far the most significant outcome for participants was the sense of belonging and community that the project helped to build. Participants spoke about gaining connections and friendships that continued beyond the classroom. For many, this project was an opportunity to build friendships beyond their usual circles, in particular, participants valued the opportunity to connect with people from different age groups. Connection with culture was another important outcome for participants in the project and for many, this project supported a better understanding of their own identity. Finally, the project provided a fun and engaging respite from everyday life. It was clear that each and every cast member valued their experience with *I Don't Wanna Dance Alone* and saw the value of this project and others like it continuing in the future.

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