

Between studio and school: The uneven flow of somatic practices in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract:

Somatic practices have become increasingly visible in contemporary dance education and creative practice, particularly in relation to bodily awareness, movement generation, improvisation and creative processes. Drawing on two years of field observation, workshops, interviews, rehearsal observations and teaching reflections undertaken in the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, this article examines how somatic practices circulate across different dance education settings and the conditions that shape their sustained use. It argues that somatic practices are more consistently embedded in artists' rehearsals and some areas of higher education, while their use in school and studio-based dance education is more uneven. This unevenness is shaped not only by the perceived value of somatic practices but also by pedagogical conditions, curriculum aims, teacher capacity, regional resources and institutional support. The South Island provides a revealing context for examining these dynamics, where somatic practices circulate through individual artists, projects, university courses and interdisciplinary initiatives but do not always form continuous pedagogical pathways across educational settings. By shifting attention from somatic practice as a method to the conditions that enable or constrain its circulation, this article offers a more situated understanding of the development and transmission of somatic practices within dance education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Keywords: somatic practices, embodied pedagogy, dance education, studio training, school dance education, Aotearoa New Zealand

Introduction

Somatic practices are often understood as an important form of bodily practice in contemporary dance training and choreographic practice (Eddy, 2009). Through breath, weight, touch, kinaesthetic perception and internal awareness, somatic practices enable dancers to reconsider how the body organises itself, responds to its environment and

generates movement (Hanna, 1986). The educational significance of somatic practices therefore lies not only in the improvement of movement quality but also in the ways it reshapes how dancers learn movement, understand the body and participate in creative processes (Fortin, 2002). In this sense, somatic practices shift dance learning away from the external imitation of movement towards an embodied pedagogy that emphasises bodily perception, reflective learning and dancer agency (Sun, 2026b).

Within the dance context of Aotearoa New Zealand, somatic practices are not a newly emerging concept. Existing scholarship suggests that somatic practices have been connected with dance education and contemporary dance training in New Zealand for several decades (Ashley, 2013; Fortin, 2002; Wood, 2020). However, this history has developed through different institutional and regional contexts rather than through a single national pathway. The following discussion therefore considers how somatic practices have been taken up in higher dance education, artists' practice and other educational settings, before examining the more uneven circulation identified through my fieldwork.

Visibility in the literature, however, does not necessarily mean that somatic practices have been consistently embedded across the wider dance education system. As a researcher who has experienced dance training and education across China, the United Kingdom and Aotearoa New Zealand, I approach the development and circulation of somatic practices from a cross-cultural and comparative perspective. My initial engagement with somatic practices began through dance training and education in China, while my subsequent study in the United Kingdom and research in Aotearoa New Zealand provided opportunities to engage with different ways of understanding and applying somatic approaches in dance. This trajectory has allowed me to consider how somatic practices travel across contexts, how it is adapted to different regional and pedagogical conditions and how its development in practice may converge with or differ from its representation in the literature. My fieldwork suggests that somatic practices are relatively visible in artists' rehearsals, higher education, creative workshops and professional dancer training (Sun, 2026a). In school dance education and private studio training, however, its use is often more fragmented, temporary or peripheral. In other words, somatic practices are not absent from the New Zealand dance field, but it has not entered all educational settings evenly. It is more likely to appear in environments that allow for exploration, reflection and open-ended creative practice, while it is less easily sustained within teaching structures shaped by examinations, performances, competitions and visible outcome-based expectations.

The South Island offers a useful case through which to examine this uneven development, particularly in relation to how somatic practice circulates through dispersed artistic, educational and community contexts. Compared with the more densely populated North Island, it has a more dispersed population and a distinctive landscape of mountains, coastline, rural communities and regional urban centres. Dunedin, where much of my fieldwork was undertaken, is one such centre, with a dance ecology shaped by the University of Otago as well as independent artists, community initiatives and interdisciplinary arts practices. The University has a long history of dance provision, with dance previously situated within the School of Physical Education and now offered through the School of Performing Arts, while initiatives such as the Caroline Plummer Fellowship have provided ongoing connections between dance, artists, research and community engagement. These historical and contemporary developments are important for understanding the local context of my research: rather than being absent, dance and somatic practices are distributed across university teaching, individual artists, workshops, fellowships, community projects and interdisciplinary practices. This dispersed ecology provides a useful context for examining how somatic practice is encountered, adapted and sustained in the South Island.

I draw on selected New Zealand fieldwork materials from my research, which examined the relationship between somatic practices, installation art and choreographic process (Sun, 2026a). Although the project focused primarily on choreographic practice, it also generated substantial material concerning dance education, rehearsal processes and pedagogical structures. This article revisits these materials to examine how somatic practices become visible, practised and constrained across different dance settings in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research adopted an ethnographic approach and involved two years of fieldwork, including interviews with artists, choreographers, teachers, dancers and students as well as rehearsal observations, workshop facilitation and teaching reflections. The materials were analysed thematically (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017), with particular attention to participants' descriptions of bodily awareness, improvisation, teaching aims, learning expectations and the conditions that enabled or limited the sustained use of somatic practices. The research received approval from the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the interview quotations, field notes, rehearsal observations, workshop materials and teaching reflections used in this article are drawn from the approved research.

All participant information has been anonymised, and participants are referred to by number rather than by name (Ref: 22/154).

I therefore ask why somatic practices are prominent in artists' rehearsals and research literature in Aotearoa New Zealand, yet circulates unevenly across school dance education, studio-based dance education and higher education. To address this question, I first examine how somatic practices have been discussed in New Zealand scholarship and taken up in artists' practice. I then consider how outcome-based models in school education and private studio training may limit its sustained use. Finally, through the South Island case, I analyse how regional differences in higher dance education resources shape the circulation of somatic practices. By examining this uneven circulation, I seek to situate somatic practices not simply as an artistic method or bodily technique, but as part of the broader ecology of dance education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Somatic practices, embodied pedagogy and dance education in Aotearoa New Zealand

Somatic practices are commonly understood as a mode of practice centred on internal bodily perception and lived bodily experience. Hanna defined the soma as “the body as lived experience”, emphasising that the body is not merely an object to be observed, trained, or controlled from the outside, but a subject perceived and experienced from within (Hanna, 1986, p. 4). Following this understanding, somatic practices enable dancers to reconsider how the body organises movement, responds to the environment and participates in the production of meaning through breath, weight, touch, bodily alignment, kinaesthetic awareness and shifts in attention (Fortin, 2002). Eddy's (2009) historical accounts of somatic practices further suggest that its development is closely connected to body mind integration, first person bodily experience and the cultivation of internal perception. In dance education, therefore, the value of somatic practices lies in improving movement efficiency, preventing injury and, more importantly, transforming how dancers learn, sense and understand movement (Dragon, 2015).

From the perspective of historical and cultural circulation, somatic practices can also be understood as a cross-cultural body of embodied knowledge. The formation of modern somatic practices has been shaped by long-term exchanges among Eastern bodily practices, modern dance, psychotherapy, body education and theories of body mind integration (Eddy, 2009; Hanna, 1986). Eastern bodily practices such as yoga, taiji, qigong and judo have influenced the development of Western somatic approaches and have been

reorganised within Euro American contexts as more systematised, therapeutic and educational bodily methods (Green, 1999; Parkes, 2017). Somatic practices are defined as an embodied educational practice that is continually translated, adjusted and institutionalised. For this reason, its movement into different countries, educational systems and training settings needs to be understood in relation to specific contexts (Brendel & Bennett, 2016).

This cross cultural and educational character is particularly visible in the dance context of Aotearoa New Zealand. Writing over 20 years ago, Fortin (2002) identified Aotearoa New Zealand as one context in which somatic practices were becoming increasingly integrated into dance education, moving beyond a supplementary role to inform technical training and curriculum development. While local dance ecologies have developed considerably since Fortin's publication, this early observation suggests that somatic practices have a longer history within New Zealand dance education than a recent pedagogical trend might suggest. This history, however, has developed through different institutional and regional pathways. In Auckland, Alison East established the National Diploma of Contemporary Dance at the Auckland Performing Arts School in 1989. The programme was subsequently taken over by Unitec and developed into its contemporary dance programme (East, 2014). From its early stages, the programme incorporated a range of contemporary and body-based practices, including Skinner Releasing, Contact Improvisation, Yoga, Alexander Technique, and other approaches concerned with embodied awareness (Wood, 2020). East, who was closely involved in establishing and directing the programme, reflects on its early curriculum and the range of contemporary dance techniques and somatic practices introduced through the programme (East, 2014). Other institutional pathways also contributed to the development of dance education beyond this Auckland programme. The Dance Studies programme at the University of Auckland became an increasingly significant centre for dance education and scholarship in the early 2000s (Schultz, 2016, 2017), while elements of somatic practices were also incorporated into the University of Waikato's dance minor from the early 2000s. Taken together, these examples suggest that somatic practices have a longer and more varied history within Aotearoa New Zealand dance education, developing through different programmes, teachers, institutions and regional contexts rather than through a single national pathway.

Beyond higher dance education and contemporary dance training, somatic practices in Aotearoa New Zealand have also extended into areas such as health, community practice and interdisciplinary body research. Dance Movement Therapy and related community-

based practices (Molloy, Keogh, Krampe, & Guzmán, 2015), for example, use somatic approaches to support bodily awareness, emotional regulation and body mind wellbeing. Molloy et al.'s (2015) study connects somatic practices with Dance Mobility for older adults, demonstrating its application to wellbeing and bodily awareness. Wallace et al.'s. (2024) research on ankle injuries among Irish dancers also indicates the practical potential of somatic practices within dance education and biomechanics.

Natural environments, a sense of place and cultural context have also given somatic approaches in Aotearoa New Zealand a distinctive local orientation. Weber's (2018) research on somatics and environmental empathy argues that somatic practices can deepen bodily attention, perception, individual autonomy and intersubjective mutuality, thereby helping dancers reconsider the relationship between body and environment. This perspective helps explain why somatic approaches in environmental and site dance research in Aotearoa New Zealand are often connected to place, ecological awareness and embodied relation. Karen Barbour's early work on embodied ways of knowing provides a methodological basis for understanding the relationship between dance, bodily experience and place. Her emphasis on autoethnography, embodied knowledge and lived experience enables bodily experience in dance to be understood as a mode of research and knowing (Barbour, 2011, 2020). In her later research on environmental and site dance in Aotearoa New Zealand, Barbour further traces the influence of Alison East and shows how New Zealand dance artists develop relationships with land, site and environment through bodily practice (Barbour, 2020). She situates these practices at the intersection of deep ecology, environmentalism, somatic pedagogies and phenomenological research, suggesting that the body is not simply placed within natural space as a moving object, but generates embodied knowledge through its relations with place, environment and the more than human world (Barbour, 2020). Similarly, in *Dancing Aotearoa: Connections with Land, Identity and Ecology*, East discussed how New Zealand contemporary dance engages with land, identity and ecology. She notes that some dancers' creative processes involve intuitive, spontaneous and psycho somatic tuning, and are influenced by somatic or body-based practices such as Skinner Releasing Technique, Body Mind Centering, Contact Improvisation, and Body Weather (East, 2014). These studies position somatic practices as more than a method of bodily training. Within environmental and site dance research in Aotearoa New Zealand, it also functions as a way of examining how dancers generate movement and embodied knowledge through their relationships with land, site, environment and the more than human world.

In sum, the literature suggests that somatic practices are a visible and locally situated part of its dance landscape. It has developed across higher dance education, artists' practice, ecological choreography, community health and interdisciplinary body research, and has formed distinctive connections with local practices and contexts. However, my fieldwork reveals a more uneven picture. Although somatic practices appear to be well established in professional, research-oriented and creation-focused contexts, its integration into the wider dance education system remains inconsistent. The following sections therefore examine how somatic practices are understood, practised and constrained across school dance education, studio-based training and regional dance education structures, and consider what this uneven development might mean for the future of dance education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Finding 1: Somatic practices as a creative tool in artists' rehearsals

What became clear in the rehearsals I observed was that somatic practices did not sit outside the creative process as a simple warm up or supporting exercise. It was often part of how artists and dancers began to work. For example, sensing weight, responding to materials, entering improvisation and allowing movement to emerge through bodily attention. Notably, my aim here is not to provide a representative account of all dance practice in Aotearoa New Zealand but to offer a situated analysis of selected artists' rehearsals and creative processes through interviews and rehearsal observations. Within these limited but in-depth cases, the artists interviewed referred to somatic practices in different ways, yet they commonly understood it as an important method for rehearsal, improvisation, bodily awareness and movement generation. In artist-led creative contexts, somatic practices therefore appear less as an auxiliary technique than as a foundation for activating bodily perception and developing movement material. In artists' rehearsals, somatic practices first appear as an open and exploratory method of movement generation. One interview participant described their creative process as directly driven by somatic practices: "It's playful. It's part of the whole process, which is also driven by somatic, it's the somatic" (Participant 5).

In this account, "playful" suggests that somatic practices offer dancers a way of entering creation through bodily sensation, material interaction and improvisational exploration. In Participant 5's rehearsal, dancers interacted with objects by moving, lifting and sensing the weight of 3D printed materials, allowing this sense of weight to transfer

into muscular response and movement variation. In other words, movement was not first externally determined by the choreographer and then executed by the dancers. It gradually emerged from the perceptual relationship between body and material.

Participant 6's account further shows how somatic practices become a creative tool within multimedia and installation-based contexts. The participant explained:

If we're talking about an authentic somatic practice, then the focus is internal, right? So, it's about how it feels ... They needed to be aware. Somatic practices are very important ... The power of somatic practices is as a creative tool. (Participant 6)

This statement indicates that, in the participant's creative process, somatic practices are not only concerned with the cultivation of internal bodily experience. It also becomes a bridge between internal sensation and external media. Dancers first need to activate bodily awareness, but this internal experience must then be externalised through movement and captured, transformed and represented through cameras, computers and projection systems. Somatic practices here functions both as a method for accessing bodily experience and as a creative mechanism through which bodily experience is translated into visual, spatial and technological relations.

In addition to objects and technological media, somatic practices are also used by artists in ecological and outdoor creative contexts. Participant 8 understood somatic practices as a way of allowing dancers to sense the "living body":

Somatic practices are about allowing dancers to feel their living body. It allows dancers to work in the way they need to and make the movements that work for their body, enabling them to be self-responsible and self-reliant. "Soma" means the holistic body, feeling, thinking, moving, experiencing, emoting and being.

Participant 8 described somatic practices as enabling dancers to "feel their living body". This expression can be understood as more than simply becoming aware of the body or noticing bodily sensations. Bodily sensations are continuously present in everyday movement and dance practice, but they are not always consciously attended to. In dance practice, attention can become strongly directed towards movement execution, musicality, spatial relationships, choreography or performance, such that subtle bodily changes may pass unnoticed (Guss-West & Wulf, 2016). Somatic practices can redirect attention towards internal bodily experience, inviting dancers to attend more closely to the ongoing changes

occurring within the body as they move (Silveira, 2020). For example, a small adjustment in one joint may influence weight, muscular tension, breath, balance and the movement of other parts of the body. In this sense, the “living body” refers to a body that is continuously changing, responding, and generating movement through interconnected bodily processes. “Feeling the living body” therefore involves not simply sensing the body but developing a sustained and conscious attentional relationship with these subtle and interconnected changes, making them available as material for movement exploration and creative practice. This heightened attention to the changing and interconnected body also has implications for dancers’ bodily autonomy and sense of bodily wholeness. For Participant 8, becoming more attentive to bodily sensations allows dancers to recognise and respond to their own bodily needs, rather than simply reproducing externally prescribed movement. Somatic practices therefore support dancers in making movement choices according to their own bodily experiences, enabling them to become more self-responsible and self-reliant as creative practitioners.

This emphasis on agency and environmental perception also appeared in outdoor and site-based rehearsals. In my rehearsal observations in Dunedin, I noted the interweaving of somatic practices and the natural environment. During one seaside improvisation, the choreographer guided the dancers into a multisensory bodily awareness through sand, the tactile sensation of the feet, the sound and movement of waves and the surrounding environment. My field note recorded:

The dancers cupped sand in their hands, letting it slowly trickle onto the tops of their feet. You see, this is a sensory moment; everything is about nature and humans. Our bodies are a universe.

Similarly, when discussing a seaside filming and improvisation process, Participant 5 stated:

We were actually at the beach, recording dance videos in a real setting, later using software to merge the background with a giant seashell. Of course, there was a lot of improvisation before filming, a process of engaging dancers in somatic experiences.

Participant 8 also described the bodily experience of an outdoor installation performance: “I had a performance outdoors. We moved, we felt our bodies, we breathed, and our emotions, bodies, and senses were interconnected with everything around us.”

Across these cases, somatic practices were not referred to only as an abstract concept or a general training philosophy. The artists spoke about it as something they actively worked with in rehearsal, a way of sensing, improvising, responding and allowing movement to emerge through embodied attention. Although their practices differed, they shared an understanding of somatic practices as a practical creative resource that shaped how dancers entered the process and developed choreographic material.

The ease with which somatic practices appeared in these rehearsals, however, should not be taken for granted. Its effectiveness was not produced by the different approaches alone but by the rehearsal conditions in which it was practised. The artists’ rehearsals I observed generally created time and space for exploration, experimentation, reflection and open-ended movement generation. The participants also tended to have prior bodily training experience, which allowed them to work with the relationship between self-awareness, improvisation and creation. In this context, somatic practices could be taken up not as an unusual interruption to rehearsal but as a familiar way of entering and developing creative work.

This observation also helps bring the fieldwork into conversation with existing discussions of somatic pedagogy. Green’s (1999, 2002) notion of somatic authority is useful here because it suggests that somatic practices can challenge externalised bodily standards by enabling dancers to develop judgement and choice through internal perception. Yet this form of authority does not emerge automatically. It depends on learners’ trust in bodily experience and their capacity to reflect on what they sense. Burnidge’s (2012) discussion of somatic pedagogy further clarifies this point by linking somatic practices to democratic and non-authoritarian pedagogical relationships. Such relationships were largely compatible with the rehearsal contexts discussed above, but they may sit less comfortably within dance training structures organised around teacher demonstration, movement replication and external evaluation.

This distinction becomes important when considering school and studio-based dance education. In the artists’ rehearsals discussed here, somatic practices were supported by time, prior bodily experience and pedagogical relationships that allowed exploration and

reflection. In more outcome-oriented teaching contexts, however, these conditions may be less available, making the sustained use of somatic practices more difficult.

Finding 2: Outcome based expectations and insufficient pedagogical scaffolding in school and studio contexts

Compared with artists' rehearsals and higher education contexts, the use of somatic practices in school dance education and private studio training appears to be less stable. As discussed above, somatic practices are more commonly visible in universities, artists' rehearsals and professional creative contexts, while it is less consistently used in studio-based training and community level dance education. As one participant explained: "It was only at university that I encountered somatic practices, which was very different from my previous experiences" (Participant 24).

For some dancers, somatic practices were not a regular part of their early dance studio or school dance experience. Instead, it became meaningful only after they entered university or began working with professional artists.

This difference is particularly evident in school and studio training contexts. Unlike artists' rehearsals, schools and studios often need to respond to curriculum schedules, examinations, performances, competitions and parental expectations. Burnidge (2012), in *Somatics in the Dance Studio: Embodying Feminist/Democratic Pedagogy*, also identified this pedagogical tension. In these settings, dance learning is often understood as a form of physical training that can be seen, demonstrated and assessed. Students are expected to learn steps, complete combinations, perform publicly or prepare for examinations, while teachers are expected to produce clear learning outcomes within limited time. For this reason, somatic approaches that emphasise slow perception, internal awareness, process-based experience and reflective learning are not always easily incorporated into the everyday rhythm of the classroom. Even within university dance programmes, somatic education still needs to negotiate with dominant discourses of technical training (Fortin, Vieira, & Tremblay, 2009).

During my fieldwork, many studio trained students tended to understand dance as a form of physical training close to sport. They were more familiar with a clearly structured class format in which the teacher demonstrates movement, students imitate it, and repeated practice is used to improve accuracy, strength, coordination and performance quality. Within this kind of training structure, visible criteria may become especially

prominent in how progress is recognised, including the clarity of movement, the completion of technical skills and the overall stage effect. By contrast, the bodily awareness, agency, choice and reflective exploration emphasised by somatic practices do not always translate immediately into visible technical achievement or stage effect. This may explain why, in studio contexts, some students experience somatic practices as a situation in which they “do not know what to do” (Participant 15).

Outcome-based expectations also affect whether teachers are willing to continue experimenting with somatic practices. One workshop teacher described an attempt to introduce somatic practices into a studio class: “I tried [somatic practices] once, but the students seemed confused; they hesitated, unsure of what to do. So, I didn’t try again because they didn’t enjoy it” (Participant 5).

Participants illustrate one of the challenges of bringing somatic practices into studio teaching. The difficulty does not lie simply in the method itself, but in a possible mismatch between somatic practices and students’ existing learning habits and classroom expectations. Students who are accustomed to clear instruction, teacher demonstration, movement imitation and visible progress may feel uncertain or resistant when the class shifts towards perception, exploration and autonomous choice. When teachers encounter this response, they may also stop using somatic practices because of concerns about student engagement and class effectiveness.

A second limitation is insufficient pedagogical scaffolding. Somatic practices is not simply a matter of asking students to “relax”, “move freely” or “feel the body”. It requires teachers to connect internal perception with dance technique, movement quality and creative aims through clear language, specific bodily tasks and age-appropriate classroom design (Dragon, 2015). Somatic approaches often rely on imagery, tactile feedback, pauses, exploration and guided bodily awareness, helping students understand the felt sense of movement rather than only copying its external form (Enghauser, 2007). Without such pedagogical scaffolding, students may not know how to understand the relationship between slow, open or less outcome-oriented tasks and their dance learning. In other words, bringing somatic practices into school or studio contexts cannot simply mean transferring university classes or artists’ workshops into a different setting. It requires translation into teaching language that is suitable for younger students, recreational learners and examination-oriented classrooms.

The New Zealand Curriculum positions dance as one of four disciplines within The Arts, with an emphasis on practical knowledge, creativity, communication and reflection, and cultural understanding. These aims share certain affinities with the awareness, care and inclusiveness emphasised in somatic education. However, curriculum aspirations do not necessarily translate consistently into everyday teaching practice. Recent research has highlighted the continuing marginalisation and uneven resourcing of arts education in New Zealand schools (Browne, 2022), while national monitoring has indicated that dance receives less instructional time and fewer opportunities for professional learning than some other arts disciplines (Educational Assessment Research Unit & New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2022). This context is important when considering the potential place of somatic approaches in dance education, as their sustained integration depends not only on curriculum intentions but also on the time, resources and pedagogical conditions available to teachers. At the same time, the distinction between curriculum ideals and teaching practice should not be understood as a simple opposition. My fieldwork suggests that, in some studio settings, teacher-led instruction does not necessarily exclude creativity or bodily awareness. For example, the use of imagery may help students develop a clearer understanding of breath and self-awareness, while peer observation can provide a visible task through which students learn to notice movement quality in themselves and others (Sun, 2026a). In this way, studio teaching may create entry points for somatic learning, but these entry points need to be carefully scaffolded if autonomous perception and reflective learning are to become part of regular classroom practice.

These limitations discussed above do not mean that somatic practices have no place in school or studio education. In my research workshops, I attempted to respond to the difficulty identified by Participant 28, who suggested that dancers may not know what to do when placed in a completely open environment. To address this, I combined somatic practices with installation art and material exploration. Participants were invited to encounter different objects through touch, using different parts of the body to make contact with materials and awaken sensory awareness. In this process, material exploration guided their curiosity and supported body mapping as a way of sensing their own bodies. These external stimuli offered a point of support within an otherwise open environment, making somatic practices more accessible to participants who were not yet familiar with this mode of bodily exploration (Sun, 2026b).

The workshop findings suggest that young students and non-professional learners can become interested in bodily perception, material interaction and open-ended movement

exploration when somatic tasks are carefully designed. The phenomenon, therefore, is not whether these learners are able to engage with somatic practices but how such practice can be redesigned in relation to their age, curriculum aims, learning habits and classroom conditions (Sun, 2026b). This does not mean reducing somatic practices to a simple classroom activity. Rather, it means creating pedagogical conditions through which its emphasis on bodily awareness, agency, sensory perception and creative exploration can become accessible within school and studio-based dance education.

This shifts the argument from access to translation. Somatic practices cannot simply be transferred from artists' rehearsals or university classrooms into school and studio settings without adjustment. It needs to be translated into pedagogical forms that retain its emphasis on bodily autonomy, sensory awareness and creativity while also responding to the practical demands of everyday dance teaching. In school or studio contexts, this may begin through carefully guided warm up, cool down, imagery-based exploration, material tasks or reflective movement activities that gradually introduce students to bodily awareness rather than requiring them to enter fully open improvisation immediately. This need for pedagogical translation becomes even clearer when considered in relation to regional dance education structures, as the following discussion of the South Island suggests.

Discussion: The South Island as a revealing case

The South Island provides a revealing case through which the uneven circulation of somatic practices in Aotearoa New Zealand dance education can be more clearly observed. Taking Dunedin as an example, the region has a diverse dance ecology that includes studio training, school dance, community dance, artist projects and interdisciplinary performing arts resources. The University of Otago, for instance, offers Dance papers and a Performing Arts degree pathway in which music, theatre and dance are brought together within an interdisciplinary structure (University of Otago, n.d.-a). Community-based initiatives such as the Caroline Plummer Fellowship also provide important opportunities for artists to connect dance making, research and community engagement (University of Otago, n.d.-b). These resources are significant. However, they do not necessarily form a continuous and independent infrastructure for higher dance education in the same way as more explicitly dance focused pathways elsewhere in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Such regional differences may shape the forms through which somatic practices are encountered and sustained. As discussed in the earlier section, Fortin (2002) identified Aotearoa New Zealand as an early context for the integration of somatic practices into higher dance education, while East's educational practice illustrates how somatic approaches became embedded within specific contemporary dance training pathways. However, these developments do not appear to have produced a uniform institutional structure across the country. In Auckland, somatic practices appear to be supported not only through scholarship and artists' practice but also through more explicitly named pathways related to Dance Studies, Dance Movement Therapy, dance wellness, dance education and pedagogy (University of Auckland, n.d.-b). In other regional contexts, such as Otago and Waikato, dance provision is often organised through minor subject structures, individual papers or interdisciplinary performing arts frameworks (University of Otago, n.d.-a; University of Waikato, n.d.). This does not suggest that dance practice is less important in these regions but indicates that somatic practices may circulate through different institutional forms, with some contexts offering fewer explicitly named or continuous pathways for training dance teachers, dance researchers and somatic pedagogy practitioners.

While the literature discussed above presents somatic practices as an established part of particular dance and artistic contexts in Aotearoa New Zealand, my fieldwork suggests a more uneven picture across educational settings. In the South Island, somatic practices were more often encountered through artists, specific university papers, workshops or interdisciplinary projects than through a stable pathway connecting higher education, studio teaching, school dance and teacher development. For example, one participant explained that they only encountered somatic practices after entering university, describing it as "very different" from their previous dance training experience (Participant 24). Another teacher recalled an attempt to introduce somatic practices into a studio class but noted that students became confused and unsure of what to do, which made the practice difficult to continue (Participant 5). These examples suggest that somatic practices can enter educational settings, but its continuity depends on more than individual interest or the value of the method itself. It also requires curriculum design, research activity, professional support and teacher development that can help translate somatic practices into sustained pedagogical forms.

At the same time, Aotearoa New Zealand offers important possibilities for thinking about somatic practices in dance education. As discussed earlier, connections between

somatic practices, the natural environment and a sense of place have been an important feature of dance scholarship and practice in Aotearoa New Zealand (Barbour, 2011; East, 2014; Weber, 2018). The relationship between body, land and environment may therefore offer a particular local context for the ongoing development of somatic practices, creating possibilities for somatic approaches to be adapted in ways that respond to the environments and artistic practices of Aotearoa New Zealand. My own fieldwork also led me to notice these possibilities. From my position as an international researcher, teacher and fieldwork participant, these possibilities appear to be connected to the country's land and sea environments, local artistic ecologies and the attention many artists give to openness, natural experience, bodily perception and interdisciplinary practice. Some of these concerns also appear to resonate with wider discussions of body, land, relation and community in Aotearoa New Zealand, although such connections require careful and culturally situated engagement (Mark & Lyons, 2010). In this sense, the development of somatic practices in New Zealand need not be understood only as the adoption of a bodily training method from Euro American dance education. It may also be considered as a pedagogical possibility that can continue to develop in dialogue with local environments, cultural contexts and artistic practices.

However, this potential does not automatically become stable educational practice. Funding, curriculum design, teacher training and institutional support remain important conditions for arts and dance education (Creative New Zealand, 2025; UNESCO, 2024). This is particularly evident in the South Island, where dance practice is certainly present but often distributed across artist projects, community dance, studio training, school dance and university-based performing arts. The phenomenon is therefore not the absence of dance but the challenge of connecting these resources in ways that can support somatic pedagogy more sustainably (University of Auckland, n.d.-a). For the South Island, this does not mean simply reproducing the Auckland model. Rather, it suggests that somatic pedagogy could develop from existing regional resources by connecting artist residencies, university-based performing arts, community dance, school dance, studio training and cross-national opportunities. Through clearer pedagogical scaffolding, the bodily exploration found in artists' practice could be translated into sustainable educational methods suitable for different ages, curriculum structures and learning goals.

Conclusion

Like waves returning to the shore, knowledge eventually returns to the body. This image is particularly relevant to somatic practices in Aotearoa New Zealand, where bodily knowledge has developed through shifting relations among dance education, artistic practice, environment and culture. Like water moving between the ocean and the shore, bodily knowledge is continually gathered, circulated and transformed through practice, before returning to individual bodies. Each dancer is both a contributor to and a recipient of this wider body of knowledge, as embodied experiences are shared, adapted and reshaped across different contexts. In this ongoing movement, knowledge is not simply passed from one body to another; it is continually renewed through the body, returning to the body in new forms.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, somatic practices are not only a way of bodily training but also a practice that has developed in relation to land, sea, artistic ecology and embodied culture. Tracing its development in this context shows that somatic practices have become part of academic discussion, artists' practice and higher dance education, while remaining less consistently embedded in some areas of school and studio-based dance education. Even where educational structures, funding conditions and arts provision remain uncertain, dancers and practitioners continue to engage with and adapt somatic practices through bodies, rehearsals, coastlines, materials, installations and creative spaces.

As a dancer and researcher who has undertaken fieldwork, teaching and observation in Aotearoa New Zealand, I have come to understand the development of somatic practices as a dynamic tension between artistic vitality and pedagogical sustainability. In artists' practices, somatic practices often support exploration, uncertainty, reflection and bodily autonomy. In school and studio-based contexts, however, its continuity depends on whether teachers can translate these values into clear tasks, designs and pedagogical structures that connect bodily perception with dance technique, creative aims and learning outcomes. This suggests that the future of somatic pedagogy depends not only on its artistic value but also on the conditions that allow it to be taught, shared and sustained across different educational settings.

In a changing arts ecology, where funding pressures and institutional conditions continue to reshape the future of arts and humanities education, somatic practices remind us that bodily knowledge remains flexible, relational and responsive. The body is not only

the presentation of visible movement but also a subject that senses, chooses, responds and creates.

Like the tide, somatic practices continue to move through Aotearoa New Zealand, but not evenly and not always in the same direction. Its presence is more visible in some artistic, creative and higher education contexts, while its sustained integration into other educational settings, particularly school and studio-based dance education, remains less consistent. In the South Island, and particularly in Dunedin, this circulation can be more dispersed, moving through individual artists, university papers, workshops, community projects and interdisciplinary practices rather than through continuous higher dance education pathways. Rather than indicating the disappearance of somatic practices, this uneven circulation shows how its presence can change across regions and educational contexts. The power of the body, and the future of dance education, do not come from command or fixed form but from flexible, sensitive, relational and reflective exploration. On this land, the tide of somatic practices continues to move, inviting us to keep sensing, creating and educating.

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