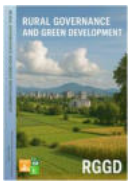
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Cultural Diversity and Social Integration in Rural Dance Education: A Review of Kristie Mortimer's Dance and Cultural Difference in Aotearoa

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ABSTRACT

This review evaluates Kristie Mortimer's Dance and Cultural Difference in Aotearoa, focusing on its contributions to understanding the role of rural dance education in promoting cultural diversity and social integration. Drawing on intercultural pedagogy and embodied knowledge, Mortimer's work positions rural dance studios as micro-publics that mediate identity, participation, and inclusion. Through a comparative lens, the review highlights the book's relevance for rural governance and cultural policy in China, especially amid ongoing revitalization initiatives. It concludes by recommending further research into ecological and digital dimensions of rural cultural practice.

1. Introduction

As cultural diversity becomes a defining feature of both global urban and rural contexts, the role of community-based art forms in promoting social cohesion and inclusive development has attracted growing academic attention. In rural revitalization efforts, particularly under the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the intersection of cultural inclusion and community participation has become central to discussions on sustainable rural governance. In this context, Kristie Mortimer's monograph Dance and Cultural Difference in Aotearoa: Finding Common Ground in Rural Dance Studio Education (2021) presents a timely and significant exploration into how dance education in rural New Zealand contributes to cultural integration and youth inclusion.

This review evaluates the academic value and interdisciplinary relevance of Mortimer's work, especially in light of the journal Rural Governance and Green Development's thematic focus on cultural governance, social innovation, and sustainable rural futures. While grounded in the specific context of Aotearoa New Zealand, the book offers considerable resonance for other national contexts—particularly in China—where rural areas are undergoing transformations in culture, identity, and social structure.

2. Summary and Theoretical Framework

The book is structured into nine chapters, each contributing to a multilayered analysis of how rural dance teachers in New Zealand respond to cultural differences in their classrooms. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with seven rural dance studio teachers, Mortimer constructs an insightful ethnographic and pedagogical narrative that foregrounds the role of dance education as both a site of potential exclusion and a tool for fostering inclusive belonging.

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Theoretically, Mortimer integrates Berry's acculturation strategies, Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, and Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) to interpret the cultural orientations and pedagogical choices of dance teachers. This triadic framework allows her to analyze how educators navigate between ethnocentric tendencies—where difference is minimized or ignored—and ethnorelative practices, where cultural plurality is acknowledged and integrated into the curriculum.

Chapters 3 to 5 investigate how dance studio content, teaching styles, and classroom interactions reflect broader racialized norms and Eurocentric standards that can marginalize students from minority or migrant backgrounds. Teachers, while often well-meaning, may unconsciously reproduce whiteness as normative by emphasizing Western genres such as ballet and jazz, while failing to incorporate culturally relevant dance practices.

Chapters 6 to 8 explore the spectrum of teacher attitudes and their implications for social integration. Here, Mortimer critically examines how some teachers demonstrate openness and cultural awareness, adapting their pedagogy to reflect students' diverse cultural identities. Others, however, either downplay cultural differences or view them as problematic, leading to exclusionary practices masked as neutral professionalism.

Chapter 9 provides a valuable set of policy and pedagogical recommendations, emphasizing culturally responsive teaching, community engagement, and reflective practice as pillars of inclusive rural dance education. Mortimer's insistence on the socio-political role of dance teachers—as agents of inclusion and cultural dialogue—challenges traditional views of dance pedagogy as apolitical or purely aesthetic.

3. Scholarly Contribution and Relevance to Rural Governance

One of the most distinctive contributions of Mortimer's book lies in its conceptual repositioning of dance education not merely as a site of artistic or aesthetic training, but as a crucial cultural governance practice embedded within the fabric of rural social life. Rather than isolating dance as an expressive art form detached from socio-political realities, Mortimer foregrounds the role of dance studios and their pedagogical processes as active agents in shaping community identity, mediating interethnic relations, and fostering localized civic participation.

Through richly detailed interviews and nuanced theoretical engagement, the book demonstrates how informal educational spaces such as rural dance studios can function as micro-publics—intimate, localized venues where social norms are rehearsed, contested, and renegotiated. These spaces, often overlooked in traditional governance literature, play a pivotal role in cultivating social trust, intergenerational dialogue, and a sense of belonging among youth who may otherwise feel disconnected from dominant cultural narratives.

This approach holds significant relevance for scholars and practitioners concerned with rural governance in diverse contexts. Particularly in China, where large-scale initiatives such as "arts entering the countryside" (文艺下乡), rural revitalization through cultural heritage, and public cultural services are key pillars of state-led development agendas, Mortimer's work offers both theoretical and methodological frameworks that can be translated and adapted. Her emphasis on grassroots pedagogy, teacher agency, and cultural responsiveness provides an alternative to top-down cultural policies that often prioritize spectacle over substance.

Moreover, the interdisciplinary scope of the book—bridging dance studies, cultural anthropology, education, and rural sociology—reflects the kind of integrative thinking needed to address complex challenges in rural development. Mortimer's attentiveness to embodied knowledge, particularly how physical movement, posture, and rhythm encode cultural values, enriches our understanding of how identity is co-produced through bodily engagement in everyday spaces. This aligns well with the editorial vision of Rural Governance and Green Development, which seeks to promote scholarship that traverses disciplinary boundaries in pursuit of practical and inclusive rural solutions.

4. Comparative Insights for Chinese Contexts

While rooted in the specific sociocultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, Mortimer's findings resonate profoundly with contemporary rural dynamics in China. The structural challenges she outlines—racialized social norms, Eurocentric aesthetic standards, and the marginalization of minority cultural expressions—mirror some of the tensions currently unfolding in China's rural cultural policy and practice, albeit within a different historical and institutional framework.

For example, in China's western and southwestern provinces—home to ethnically diverse populations such as the Yi, Miao, and Dong peoples—efforts to promote intangible cultural heritage often struggle to balance authenticity with modernization, and preservation with participation. Mortimer's advocacy for culturally responsive pedagogy offers a conceptual corrective to practices that may exoticize or homogenize minority dance traditions under the banner of national unity.

Her emphasis on teacher training and the cultivation of intercultural sensitivity is particularly instructive for China's "cultural talents in villages"（乡村文化能人） initiative, which aims to foster local artistic leadership. Rather than treating these individuals as passive transmitters of tradition, Mortimer's framework encourages a view of educators as reflexive practitioners capable of adapting to the fluid cultural identities of rural youth.

Furthermore, her notion of dance classrooms as participatory public spheres has strong parallels with China's grassroots cultural innovations—such as the self-organized "square dance"（广场舞） groups that populate rural and peri-urban public spaces, or community-based theater projects that integrate agricultural themes with performative storytelling. These phenomena underscore the potential of localized, everyday cultural practices to function as vehicles for social inclusion and rural agency.

The book also invites comparative research on how rural communities across the Global South navigate cultural transformation in the face of migration, digitalization, and generational change. In this light, Mortimer's work not only contributes to English-language scholarship but also opens a dialogue with Chinese-language research on rural aesthetics, governance, and development.

5. Limitations and Areas for Further Development

While Mortimer's study is commendable for its depth and clarity, certain limitations should be acknowledged. First, the book predominantly foregrounds the perspectives of teachers, leaving less room for the voices and lived experiences of students. Although the rationale for this focus is methodologically sound, a more balanced inclusion of learner perspectives—especially from marginalized cultural backgrounds—could offer additional insights into the reception and efficacy of pedagogical practices.

Second, while the book engages extensively with issues of cultural inclusion, it pays limited attention to the environmental, technological, or economic dimensions of rural transformation. As rural communities increasingly contend with climate challenges, digital divides, and shifting labor economies, there is a growing need to understand how dance and other cultural practices intersect with these broader structural changes. For instance, how might digital platforms for dance performance reshape access and participation in rural arts education? What role might eco-performance or environmentally themed choreographies play in cultivating ecological consciousness among rural youth?

These questions point to promising avenues for further research, particularly within the scope of Rural Governance and Green Development, which explicitly seeks to integrate green technologies and sustainable practices into cultural and community-based initiatives. Future studies that incorporate ecological and digital perspectives could deepen and diversify the analytical lens Mortimer has effectively initiated.

6. Conclusion

Kristie Mortimer's Dance and Cultural Difference in Aotearoa stands as a well-researched, conceptually robust, and socially engaged contribution to the fields of rural education, intercultural pedagogy, and community-based arts practice. By centering the lived realities of rural dance educators navigating cultural diversity, the book moves beyond abstract theorization to offer grounded, actionable insights into how art and education can serve as engines of inclusive rural governance.

For readers and contributors to Rural Governance and Green Development, Mortimer's work is especially valuable. It offers a comparative reference point for similar initiatives in China and elsewhere, provides a nuanced methodological blueprint for interdisciplinary fieldwork, and affirms the importance of culturally sensitive, participatory educational models in building sustainable and equitable rural futures.

As nations grapple with the complexities of revitalizing rural life in culturally heterogeneous contexts, this book reminds us that meaningful change often begins not in policy chambers, but in humble spaces like dance studios—where young people move, learn, and find common ground through shared rhythms and stories.

Author Contribution

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Competing Interest declaration

The author declares that, to their knowledge, they have no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as a potential competing interest regarding the work described in this manuscript.

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