In light of current community concerns regarding public health, particularly with respect to the growing problem of obesity (sometimes now deemed to have reached epidemic proportions), it is remarkable that young people’s voluntary participation in community-based dance classes has not received more attention (Baur & Burrell 2005). In this paper, we outline some of the issues surrounding young people’s participation in dance classes, which may have relevance from a public health point of view. In particular, understanding community dance class participation may provide ways to move beyond a reductive and disciplinary model of “physical exercise” in order to think more productively about possibilities for the well-being of young people. It seems plausible that examination of young adults’ participation in dance classes may reveal something about the kinds of skills, qualities and experiences young people value in the bodily and social dimensions of their lives. Such an understanding may be critical to our capacity to respond effectively to public health concerns about illness arising from sedentary lifestyles, rising rates of obesity, teenage depression, substance abuse and social disengagement.

Dance, sport and health
Despite the dominance of electronic and visual media in contemporary Australian youth leisure activities and cultural practices, dancing is still a popular recreational activity for young people. Dance is placed 16th on a list of the top 40 most popular “sports or recreation” activities in Victorians’ participation in exercise, recreation and sport (2001–2) – a pamphlet published by Sport and Recreation Victoria in collaboration with the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (n.d.) – and attendance at dance classes forms a significant part of this activity. The Melbourne Yellow Pages has at least 350 listings for dance teachers and studios offering a range of dance forms from Irish dancing and ballet to Salsa and belly-dance. At the 2003 Melbourne International Festival, the ‘Dancing
Most approaches to physical activity are body which tends to underpin them. Nevertheless, currently in Australia, the health benefits of dancing are promoted significantly less than those of sport. Prime Minister John Howard is reported as “hoping to involve the AFL, Cricket Australia and other sports bodies in [a] program which may include sports stars promoting healthy eating habits” and “the Australian Sports Commission and the Health Department are developing an ‘eat smart, play smart’ campaign to be known as the ‘playing for life’ scheme, to be run at after-school care programs to promote healthy lifestyle activities” (Hudson 2004). During the federal election campaign in 2004, Howard promised $10m each to Footscray (Victoria) and Penrith (NSW) regions to develop local sporting facilities. Obvious factors in the far greater emphasis on the health (and not to mention electoral) benefits of sport vis-à-vis dancing include the significant corporate financial interests in sport and the identification of sport with both the (Australian) nation and masculinity.

The emphasis on sport as a perceived answer to health-related social problems is underpinned, in our view, by a reduced, biomechanical conception of the body. A biomechanical view of the body reflects scientific and physiological approaches and values and is consistent with a demand that the “health” effects of exercise participation be able to be measured quantitatively (Ransdell, Oakland & Taylor 2003). However, we feel that the body and its health “must be understood through a range of disparate discourses and not simply restricted to naturalistic and scientific modes of explanation” (Grosz 1994, p.20). Current public health models of physical well-being have significant limitations precisely because of the positivist, scientific model of the body which tends to underpin them. Most approaches to physical activity are governed by cause and effect notions which hold that deficits in physical activity can be remedied by doctors, schools, government and individual willpower. In this article, we propose instead a non-reductive concept of physical health that takes “dancing” rather than “exercise”, “fitness” or “sport” as its model of physical activity because dancing is a potential site for individuals’ engagement of and with their bodies in all of their lived social, physical, spatio-temporal, aesthetic, sensuous and otherworldly dimensions. A focus on dancing supports a move away from an instrumental notion of the body towards one that is affective, intersubjective and, therefore, itself a social phenomenon. In other words, there is often a gap in physical activity knowledge at the policy level, which an attention to community involvement in dancing can help to address.

Similarly, an investigation of community participation in dancing might help to articulate crucial alternative conceptions of physical health that orient public health initiatives towards empowerment not blame (Department of Human Services 2002). The body is not simply an object upon or through which discipline or utility must be imposed, but is also that through which values, meanings and pleasures are enacted and created. It is important to recognise, for example, that young people’s interest in dancing is likely to be expressed in terms other than the strictly utilitarian or health-oriented. Young adults often articulate their “use” of dancing in terms of its risk value or precisely because it enables one to live for the moment: dancing is as likely to be “fun” or “addictive”, as one young swing dance enthusiast has commented, as it is to be perceived as a beneficial form of exercise:

“It’s an addiction. There were times over Christmas I went away with the folks and after three days I was sitting at the Christmas table with all the family and I’m just jittering. Mum’s going, “What’s wrong?” I’m like, “Mum it’s a Thursday you know exactly what’s wrong”… I realised that right now I could be social dancing and it was eating away at me that I wasn’t, I was somewhere else and I was missing it and everyone else was dancing and I wasn’t (Gardner 2006).

The compulsive pleasure of dancing, as well as its sociocultural dimensions, is foregrounded in this interview. If we consider the perspective of the young person as willing participant in physical activity, then an improved health outcome would be associated with this pleasure rather than a strictly functional logic of “it’s good for you”. Gaining an understanding of the diverse social and individual values and meanings of physical well-being will entail listening to the voices of young people in their “body talk” and seeking to understand what it is they experience when they are dancing. In terms of the desired outcomes articulated through such public health initiatives as the National Obesity Taskforce (2003), which seeks to better understand the “knowledge, attitudes, intentions, behaviours and other indicators relating to … active living”, a recognition of participation in dance classes is crucial. Indeed, as we have already commented, it is remarkable that the extent and nature of the value of this kind of community participation in dance has rarely been explored or acknowledged publicly.

Popular culture and youth dance

What can research already undertaken into “youth dance” tell us about its potential as a source for understanding community participation in physical activity? International academic attention to “youth dance” in English-speaking contexts has tended to focus on social dance practices such as “disco” and “rave” (Rust 1969; Brabazon 2002). In the 1960s, for instance, Frances Rust (1969) studied “young people’s habits and attitudes with relation to dancing” paying particular attention to “contemporary teenage solo dancing to beat music” (p.2). Subsequently, this “night
Youth dance cultures are also discussed in the context of research and analysis of popular music; however, dance tends to remain of subordinate interest in these contexts. A recent article in Melbourne’s *The Age* newspaper (Donovan 2004) reported on the ‘Push It!’ program in Melbourne’s Debney Park Secondary College, in which 14- to 18-year-olds were taught “the three main components of hip-hop – rapping, DJing and dancing – by local hip-hop musicians and dancers.” While the printed story was accompanied by a large image of a young Muslim girl dancing, the article itself was a summary of the development of Australian rap music over the past decade with no discussion of hip-hop dancing at all. Nor did the article consider the potentially powerful story of what it might have meant for this young woman to participate in a style of dance that produces new identifications of gender, ethnicity, education or artistic expression.

For young people, their dancing is, of course, often entwined within popular music cultures. Recent research being undertaken in this area (Baker 2002) focuses on the relatively private practices of pre-teenaged children and their uses of popular music, where children’s “play”, including dancing, is understood as important “work” around emerging identity, sexuality and gendered subjectivity. Baker (2002) writes that, in their engagement with popular music, particularly through dance, young girls play at being “sexual” – they try a more sexual persona on for size (p.19). This kind of study builds on the substantial body of work in early childhood studies where dance is seen as an important aspect of young children’s developing exploration of boundaries and connections between self and world (Dimondstein 1971). There has been much less attention, however, to the whole field of structured dancing experiences and involvements constituted by adolescents’ and young adults’ enrolment in classes in diverse forms of social, popular, traditional and stage dance. The dance class, we suggest, is perhaps one of the more potent sites for further study of youth dance cultures because it is not overtly “anti-social”. Rather, it functions on many different levels to normalise physical activity in adolescence for different groups of young people across cultures.

Attending dance classes is an important activity in which young adults explore and shape their embodiments in social contexts. Of particular significance is the fact that dance classes involve a teacher, often an older adult. It is possible that dance class participation goes unremarked as a youth “leisure” activity precisely because the very concept of youth leisure has attached to it “some notion of activity not directed by parents or other adults” (Frost 2001, p.93). Going to dance classes may thus fall outside of those activities that contribute to social definitions of “youth” or “teenager” as inherently at risk or dysfunctional.

Feminist sociologists, such as Angela McK Robbie (1984) who wrote a seminal article on young people and dance, have insisted that studies of subculture and young people consider gender differences. That many girls and young women go to dance classes, and perhaps much more so than boys (although the actual relative rates of participation would need careful investigation), is of great importance given the continuing difficulties girls face, despite three decades of social transformation with respect to the social status of and opportunities for women. In a recently published book, *Young women and the body*, sociologist Liz Frost (2001) writes that,

"Perhaps the principal defining features of this constructed stage referred to as adolescence can be, for girls, the enforced location of self or identity within the confines of a gendered body ... That being “grown up” necessitates being massively identified with the body, is the change that girls undertake."

According to Frost (2001), the outcome of this change is all too frequently “alienation and objectification of parts of the self” (p.71). It is not difficult to imagine that dancing might be significant for girls and young women in this context of becoming “massively identified” as a body, but what precise character this significance might take for each is not self-evident. There are more traditional reasons (associated with the desire to acquire “gracefulness” and “poise”) as to why girls and young women especially have tended to take up, or have been encouraged to take up, various forms of dancing, particularly ballet. But given the present range of different kinds of dance styles for which classes are available, at least in urban areas, and the different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of young women who go to dance classes, the uses and meanings for them of this activity may be very diverse indeed (Foster n.d., Gardner 1995).

Recent developments in dance studies can provide further, important perspectives on young people’s engagement with dance. Although many directions of inquiry have been closely articulated to developments in modern and postmodern dance practices throughout the 20th century, these also have implications beyond the field of professional or artistic dance. Traditions in dance performance, whether highly codified, expressive or improvisatory, also involve an individual “discovery” approach to creating and elaborating movement forms and aesthetic concerns. Indeed, a contradictory tendency in the transmission of dance technique has been identified.
by American sociologist Randy Martin (1998) – while dance classes might be places for social or citizen formation, they are also spaces where the “diverse capacities and practical differences that compose a self are assembled” (p.179). The student in a dance class is negotiating complex movement patterns and social affinities that shift from the authority of the teacher to consciousness of the body’s own moves to that of its affinity with, or difference from, others in the room.

Leading dance theorist Susan Leigh Foster (n.d.) has suggested that as dance class participants encounter and negotiate their own and other dancers’ corporealities, they learn to acknowledge and accept (bodily) difference. Foster seeks to raise awareness of the “complex lessons about sameness and difference that occur during the process of learning another body’s moves” (n.d.). She argues that taking dance classes can be a means of learning to belong in a world in which, increasingly, bodies can be fast, dangerous and heterogeneous. Foster thus suggests the possibility that being explicitly in classes can be a means of learning to belong in a world in which, increasingly, bodies can be fast, dangerous and heterogeneous. Foster thus suggests that closer attention to actions and interactions in dance classes might “show us how to think on our feet” – or, we suggest, through our feet. The bringing together of sociology, phenomenology and kinesiology in dance studies provides an important interdisciplinary basis upon which to investigate dance class participation.

Dance classes and sociality
While the format of a dance class may seem self evident and all too familiar from the stereotyped representations of Hollywood and ballet, closer attention reveals that complex social/corporeal transactions occur in this setting. As we have suggested, attending dance classes – as opposed to participating in disco or rave dancing – is a relatively structured activity involving a teacher. What is the specific role of the dance teacher from the young person’s point of view? While the style of dance being learned may attract young people in the first instance, a specific teacher can come to play a significant role in a young person’s relation to, and perception of, her/his own body. One young hip hop dancer explained:

Moving on to a female instructor personally allowed me to explore my own connection with the forms. I could look up to her and actually aspire to achieve what she could do because I knew it was physically possible (Chianese 2006).

Unlike the apparent abandonment of raving, classes present a specific, structured and codified dance style. This activity, however, takes place outside the parameters of the formal educational context (which is dominant in teenagers’ and young adults’ lives) and is usually not for evaluation or assessment. Despite media preference for representing competitive and individualistic aspects of dance, attending a dance class includes individual, communal and interpersonal body-focused experiences. The kinds of dance taught in classes are “traditional” in the sense that each style – whether hip hop, swing dancing or flamenco – has a history within specific cultures, so that participants are part of a (complex) process of cultural dissemination and transmission. Within migrant communities, dance classes can be part of a process of cultural maintenance as well as providing both communities and individuals with a way of negotiating change (Ram 2005).

At an individual level, attending dance classes can involve a desire to be like the teacher or other dancers in the class or to be part of that (other) culture. Dance classes thus entail both self- and other-oriented subjectivity. Dance classes are also occasions for heightened perceptions of one’s own body where “private” sensations are elaborated in public space. Dance class experience involves an encounter with the otherness and resistance of the dance’s rhythms, qualities/forces and forms as well as the otherness or resistance of other bodies with whom one is trying to synchronise. For example, the young swing dancer quoted above has explained, with reference to the partnering work that is the basis of swing dancing:

You’ve just got to match each other. Some people dance a little different to others. Some people are bigger, some people are smaller, some people travel, some people don’t. You’ve just got to work it out between you (Gardner 2006).

In her study of young adults’ participation in a contemporary dance performance group in inner London, Helen Thomas (1993) found that feeling other than one’s everyday self, feeling transported into another inexpressible domain or state, and “forgetting” the mundane world that one left when entering the dance studio were common experiences for her respondents:

... It’s like your body’s doing something completely different. You’re forgetting what happened before or something like that ... (p.79).

If there is a sense of living in the
of experiences that involve a complex mixture of energy use and transformation through plays of desire, pleasure, relaxation, obsession, frustration, envy and exhaustion. Sociologist Kalpana Ram (2005) has noted that the term “learning dance” is an impoverished one that gives little indication of the complexities of the processes that are set in train or of the cultural-corporeal boundaries that are traversed. Ram (2005) also notes that while “learning dance” involves “copying” and “repetition” (themselves “impoveryed” terms) when patterns become body memory and “cease to be routine ... they free the student up for creative interpretations and innovation” (p.122).

In terms of their sociality, what do young people learn in dance classes? In learning forms of dance, what disciplinary/regulative, on the one hand, and, on the other, transgressive and creative potentials, can young people make use of (Henry, Magowan, & Murray 2000)? At a phenomenological level, what does it feel like and what does it mean for them to be individually “in movement” as well as in movement in relation to others? What embodied social skills do they mobilise and what skills do they acquire through these practices? Do young people gain and value “knowledge that comes up through the feet”? While space restrictions preclude lengthy discussion of these questions here, it may be productive to consider dance classes and young people in terms of Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of “cultural capital”, an idea which is closely linked to an individual’s or group’s possibility for “aesthetic appreciation”. For Bourdieu (1986), acquiring “cultural capital” is a function of one’s material conditions of existence, of being able to suspend or withdraw from economic necessity and to gain a distance from “practical urgencies” (p.54). At the level of the body, it could be argued that, through dancing, we are able to gain an important “aesthetic” distance from the brute necessities or urgencies of the body – which, for teenagers and young adults, may be particularly insistent or confusing at this stage of their lives.

**Dance classes and economics**

The aim of this paper has been to provide some background to the perceived potential of young people’s participation in dance classes to lead to new directions in public health strategy and promotion. We have outlined some important social, phenomenological and physical aspects of dance class participation, drawing on research from a range of disciplines. Before concluding, we want to signal briefly some aspects of the wider social and economic conditions within which dance classes actually take place. The notion of social capital and its links to health have already been suggested in public policy research. Social capital emphasises the “interpersonal preconditions for social life, as distinct from the material conditions of social existence (physical capital) and the attributes of individual social actors (human capital)” (McQueen-Thomson & Ziguras 2002).

According to Baum et al. (2000), by reflecting on social capital in relation to public policy, it becomes possible to consider the contribution that voluntary associations and small local organisations “make to the building of healthy communities, and the benefits these offer to all aspects of society”. One of the distinctive characteristics of dance class cultures, for example, is the relative lack of commercial potential or potential for commodification.6 If dancing is an attractive activity for some young people, its attraction lies perhaps in the pleasurable and transitory engagement of the body’s intensities and forces, rather than in the consumption or acquisition of visible and desirable commodities – although one’s own body and one’s sense of self are also “objects” undergoing transformation while dancing, and through the formative impact of dance regimes.

Across the range of dance subcultures, unlike sport, there is rarely the involvement of funding or branding.
by large multinational corporations, even though dance clothes and representations of some dance forms through various media may connect it very strongly with certain brands, products and lifestyles (MacDonald 2000). For example, Jill Matthews (1987) has noted that historically dance has “achieved both legitimacy and widespread popularity though the modern technologies of radio, cinema and mass journalism” (p.31). Musical theatre is another often high-profile context for the corporate dissemination and branding of dancing culture, and of course ballet culture is widely disseminated and supported financially through a range of large public institutions.

Although there are some high-profile dance studios producing dancers for television or the entertainment industry, the majority of dance classes, however, take place in discreet unbranded venues above shops or in church or community halls. In Melbourne, for example, ‘Albert Park Jazz-Funk’ operates out of the Middle Park Primary School Hall; ‘City Dance Centre’ uses the Armadale Baptist Church Hall; and Israeli and Greek dancing classes also take place in church halls in Preston and Carnegie. The attendance of participants in these classes is usually voluntary and self-funded, and teachers are often independent, self-employed practitioners. Dance studios, therefore, form part of the small business sector, which operates semi-autonomously from local, State or national political structures. Understanding the role that these micro-economies of dance culture play in providing opportunities for physical activity within the community could form part of a process of dismantling traditional boundaries between public and private sectors. They provide a service that must be diverse and affordable in order to respond to local audiences but, as we have argued, must also provide individual and social benefits that exceed the fiscal considerations. These dance studios and individual teachers could help to create new partnerships with public agencies in addressing public health needs for young people.

Conclusion
Young adults’ participation in dance classes is a significant though under-valued aspect of early 21st century Australian youth culture. As a model of youth activity, dance classes are distinguished by their extracurricular, and semiformal, organisational structure; a regular, repetitive time frame; a unique economic structure; a community capacity-building function; and an embodied communication of ideas and values between peers and in relation to a significant, more experienced other. We consider that an investigation of how and why young people “use” this kind of dance experience would lead to important insights concerning their social world. Such an investigation could also provide insights into how members of this age group negotiate the transition from adolescent to adult embodiments; the transition from dependence to independence; young people’s place in global and local cultures; the role of individuals within groups; and the instability of contemporary identities and subjectivities.

This approach to young people’s experience of dance classes could also provide the background for a new approach to public policy-making with respect to health promotion, one that involved a re-conceptualisation of issues surrounding community participation in physical activity. Locating this discussion within a public health context enables important aspects of dance class participation to become visible and to add complexity to understandings about young people and physical activity. A focus on “dancing” as a model of physical activity, rather than on fitness, exercise or sport, can encourage a non-reductive view of the body and suggests that the dance class is a dynamic site where values and meanings are negotiated and created. We suggest that this focus also provides an alternative to discourses of marginal or at-risk youth. In contrast to these discourses, dance classes are widely distributed, heterogeneous social practices undertaken on a voluntary basis by young people. As such, dance classes create small communities that provide strong patterns of identification and sociality.

Notes
1 By way of contrast, an English 2004 report for the Chief Medical Officer includes dancing as a beneficial physical activity for all life stages – At least five a week: Evidence on the impact of physical activity and its relationship to health, www.dh.gov.uk.
2 ‘A healthy balance: Victorians respond to obesity’ (Department of Human Services 2002) recommends that ‘rather than telling kids what they should be doing, you ask them’!
3 Helen Thomas (1993) has undertaken research into young people’s involvement in a dance project based on contemporary dance classes. See ‘An-other voice: Young women dancing and talking’ in Dance, gender and culture.
4 We note, however, Ian Maxwell’s (2003) extensive study of Australian hip-hop dance culture, Phat beats, dope rhymes: Hip hop down under comin’ upper.
5 Even though, as Laurence Louppe (2001/2) argues, dance is particularly susceptible to commodification through the reification of the body when its stylistic signatures become framed as spectacle. See ‘What is political in dance?’ Writings on Dance.
6 Dimonstein (1971) also writes that “kinesthetic awareness refers not only to … bodily reactions or muscle memory, but to a conscious perception of (one’s) body’s ability to ‘feel’ movement”. (p.5).

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