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Arts-related Practices in Preschool Education: An Asian Perspective

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Abstract
Compelling research and contemporary early childhood curriculum frameworks have increasingly emphasized the importance of arts education in fostering children’s holistic development. However, there is limited research focused on documenting what arts-related pedagogical practices look like in actual classroom settings, particularly in Asia. Drawing on a large dataset of observations conducted in Kindergarten 1 classrooms (4-5 years), this study maps the arts education landscape in Singapore preschools. Findings show that: (1) Certain art forms are commonly observed (e.g., visual arts 2D, singing, and movement) whereas others are rare (e.g., visual arts 3D, dance); (2) Teachers and students engage with the arts in four different types of settings (integrated learning activities, fillers and transitions, learning center time, and art-focused lessons), in which the presence of the various art forms considerably differs; (3) While classroom climate is generally positive and children seem to enjoy engaging with the arts, teachers focus on providing product-oriented instructions rather than fostering children’s individual creativity and expression; and (4) Although art activities are frequently available to children, there is limited accessibility to art activities and materials due to the rigidity of schedules. We conclude that while arts education plays an important role in Singapore’s preschool education, pedagogical practices—perhaps as a reflection of Asian values and societal expectations—are primarily reproductive and teacher-led. Professional development should enhance teachers’ level of preparation to better foster children’s free exploration and access to resources, creativity and self-expression, and their confidence to utilize certain art forms more often. These findings enrich the limited classroom-based arts education international literature. Similarities and differences with Western studies are discussed.

Keywords
Arts education, preschool, curriculum, art forms, classroom observation, teaching practices, Asia

Acknowledgements
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Arts-related Practices in Preschool Education: An Asian Perspective

The vital importance of the arts in education has been recognized for centuries, beginning with classic philosophers such as Plato, Pythagoras, or Aristotle (Siesling, 2015). Today, scholars and educators agree that the arts should be included as part of the curriculum from the early stages of children’s development, for a variety of reasons. First, education in the arts is important in itself because the arts are an integral part of the cultural heritage of societies, hence integral to the development of human beings (Gadsden, 2008). Second, there is increasing evidence that the various art forms allow young children to acquire skills that are central to their cognitive, social, communicative and/or motor development (e.g., Hallam, 2010). For example, while music-and-movement and dance contribute to optimize children’s motor skills development (Henriksson-Macaulay & Welch, 2015), drama fosters children’s socio-emotional knowledge, skills, and attitudes about themselves and the world around them (Szecsi, 2008). Third, sufficient research exists to overwhelmingly support the belief that engagement in the arts functions as a ‘brain developer’, contributing to enhance learning throughout all academic areas. The arts enhance the process of learning because the systems that they nourish (which include our integrated sensory, attentional, cognitive, emotional, and motor capacities) are, in fact, the driving forces behind all other learning (Curtis & Fallin, 2014). Finally, there is evidence that the arts provide children with non-academic benefits such as improved motivation and self-esteem, cultural awareness, problem solving or decision making, improved emotional expression, as well as social harmony and appreciation of diversity (Magsamen & Battro, 2011).
This study focuses on arts education at the preschool education level. Preschool teachers play an essential role in facilitating children’s aesthetic and creative self-expression through the arts. However, there is very limited research focused on what arts education pedagogical practices look like in actual classroom settings (e.g., Bond, 2015; Ferrari & Addessi, 2014; Hallam, 2010). The present paper contributes to fill this gap in the literature from the perspective of an Asian nation: Singapore. Drawing on a large dataset of observations conducted in Kindergarten 1 classrooms (4-5 year olds), we map the landscape of arts education pedagogical practices in Singapore preschools. More precisely, we examine the frequency of the various art forms observed in the classroom (e.g., visual arts 2D/3D, music-and-movement, signing) and describe the types of settings in which arts education pedagogical practices are observed (e.g., art activities, integrated activities, transitions). Furthermore, we analyze the interactional and instructional features of arts-related teaching and learning practices, as well as the availability and accessibility of arts-related activities and materials in the classroom. Findings enrich the limited classroom-based arts education international literature and serve as the basis for a discussion on how Western child-centered ideas and principles are translated into practice in Asian educational settings.

*Arts Education in Early Childhood: Western Ideas in Asian Curriculum Frameworks*

Contemporary early childhood curriculum frameworks in Western countries are typically based on child-centered ideas and principles about education and how children learn (Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985), with direct implications for how the arts should be introduced and taught to young children in the classroom. For example, Western frameworks conceive the child as an active and constructive creator of

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1 In Singapore, the term ‘preschool’ refers to both kindergarten and child care centers.
knowledge, and therefore propose that teachers should give children the necessary agency and freedom to direct their own learning. In approaches such as Reggio Emilia and Montessori, children-initiated projects and play-based learning are used to foster children’s innate curiosity, and children are encouraged to express their ideas and feelings through different symbolic systems, including those utilized in the various art forms (Bond, 2015). It is understood that children learn best in classroom environments where free-choice and access to materials is allowed, which makes them feel more confident and comfortable, similar to how they feel at home (McKie, Manswell Butty, & Green, 2012). To foster children’s self-directed learning, therefore, the teacher is expected ensure the availability and accessibility of varied materials and resources, allowing children independence in decision-making about what to use and how to use it, at least for a substantial portion of the day (McKie et al., 2012).

Another characteristic of contemporary early childhood curriculum frameworks relates to the adoption of curriculum integration. This student-centered pedagogical approach uses learning activities focused on real life themes or problems that require concepts and/or processes from multiple fields of knowledge (Zupančič, Čagran, & Mulej, 2015). Integrated learning activities allow children to translate what they learn into a variety of contexts, make connections with prior knowledge and everyday experiences, and acquire new knowledge in more meaningful ways (Todd, 2010). This connects with the notion of arts integration, or teaching through the arts (Richard & Treichel, 2013), where the intent is using the arts as a vehicle for the teaching of other subjects in more engaging or enjoyable ways. Thus, preschool teachers are expected to incorporate the arts within integrated learning activities to make learning more stimulating, as well as less rigid and predictable, exposing
children to open-ended situations and enhancing their creative thinking skills, which are necessary for complex imaginative problem-solving (Gadsden, 2008).

Furthermore, there is widespread agreement in Western countries that the arts should trespass the purely instructional classroom formats and become a pervasive interactional tool (Stan & Popa, 2014). Indeed, preschool teachers are instructed to utilize arts-related routines (e.g., singing, music and movement) as fillers to keep the flow and momentum of learning experiences, to call for children’s attention and foster their discipline, and during transitions between activities and spaces (Sotiropoulou-Zormpala, 2012).

These principles and ideas can be also observed in ‘Nurturing Early Learners’ (NEL) (MOE, 2013b), the national curriculum framework in Singapore. The NEL offers a flexible framework to guide kindergarten and child care center teachers in the provision of high quality preschool education for children aged four to six. The Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE) carefully designed the NEL by examining developmental and learning theories originated primarily in Western countries, as well as best early childhood education practices across the world, with a special focus in American and European nations (Tan, 2007). Inspired by the research of Lev Vygotsky, John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Jerome Bruner, the NEL is based on six key theoretical underpinnings: (1) A holistic approach to development and learning; (2) Integrative learning; (3) Children as curious, active, and competent learners; (4) Adults as interested supporters in learning; (5) Interactive learning; and (6) Play as a medium for learning to encourage children to think widely, be more engaged and explore ideas thoughtfully (MOE, 2003). Preschools in Singapore are highly encouraged, although not mandated, to follow the NEL.
The NEL considers *Aesthetics and Creative Expression* to be one of the key six learning areas for children’s holistic development. The four learning goals established for *Aesthetics and Creative Expression* are: (1) to enjoy art and music and movement activities, (2) to express ideas and feelings through art and music and movement, (3) to create art and music and movement using experimentation and imagination, and (4) to share ideas and feelings about art and music and movement. The guide specific to *Aesthetics and Creative Expression* (MOE, 2013a) provides pedagogical tools and strategies for preschool teachers to conduct activities solely focused on arts, music or creative movement, guidelines to select and organize materials within learning corners (for children’s use during learning center time), as well as assessment and documentation strategies. While the guide stresses the need to ensure children’s opportunities to engage in arts-related practices, it does not propose an optional frequency with which the various art forms (e.g., visual arts 2D/3D, music-and-movement) should be introduced or taught to children. Similarly, NEL does not specify how often children should be engaged in the arts within different types of learning settings and activities (e.g., arts activities, integrated learning activities, small-group work during learning center time, fillers/transitions).

Despite Singapore’s openness to Western principles and ideas, there is at least one feature in which the NEL curriculum framework reflects traditional Asian cultures and values: the understanding of the roles that teachers should play in children’s education (Tan, 2007). The NEL conceives the teacher as a facilitator, mediator, and guidance of children’s learning, as a designer of the learning environment, and ultimately, as the person in charge of establishing the learning goals and providing children with activities, resources, or materials. Some of these elements are aligned with Western notions (Overland, 2013), but not all. NEL claims to be a
child-centered curriculum framework, where children are considered the protagonists of their own learning. However, we think this notion is somewhat incompatible with the idea of teachers establishing specific learning goals for every moment of the school day, or deciding whether children should be provided (or not) with certain activities, resources, or materials. In our viewpoint, this way of conceiving the teacher’s roles and responsibilities may be interpreted as a reflection of Confucian traditional values of respect for elders and authority, scholarship and learning (Lam, 2015).

A paradigmatic example of how Western ideas have been adapted (rather than adopted) in Asian educational systems is NEL’s notion of “purposeful play” (MOE, 2013b). As mentioned above, NEL emphasizes the importance of play-based learning as one of the pillars of early childhood education. However, in contrast to the notion of free-play (King & Howard, 2016), where children are given total freedom and teachers just observe from the background and intervene only under children’s request, purposeful play involves children engaging in ludic activities that are intended to foster specific learning outcomes (previously established by the teacher), predominantly within environments that are also carefully designed by the teacher (e.g., learning corners). NEL states that teachers should be sensitive to children’s interests and always seek to find out what children know, what they pay attention to, and what might engage children to learn in fun and meaningful ways. However, at a conceptual level, some scholars and practitioners argue that the relative control exercised by the teacher in purposeful play is against the very notion of play (Leggett & Ford, 2013).
There is limited research focused on documenting what arts education pedagogical practices look like in actual classroom settings, particularly at the preschool level. In the ‘NCEDL Multi-State Study of Pre-Kindergarten’, which included more than 900 children representative of 211,000 children across six states in the United States, Winton and Bussye (2005) observed how children spent their classroom time over a two-day period. Results indicated that teachers engaged children in arts-related activities about 9% of the time (compared to 13% for social studies, 8% for science, 6% for maths, and 6% for literacy), whereas in 44% of the time, teachers did not provide children with any type of learning activity.

Most of the art-specific observational studies have focused on the teaching of music (Bond, 2015; Ehrlin, 2015; Ferrari & Addessi, 2014), followed by visual and performing arts (Phillips, Gorton, Pinciotti, & Sachdev, 2010). To the best of our knowledge, the scholarly literature does not contain observational studies focused on how art forms such as dance and drama are introduced or taught to preschool children. There are, however, some studies of arts teaching practices at the primary (Vahter, 2016) and secondary school levels (Bautista, Tan, Ponnusamy, & Yau, 2016).

Bond (2015) examined music education in three North American preschools inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach. This multiple case study identifies and describes the variety of strategies used by Reggio-inspired teachers to engage children in “musicking” throughout their day (whether in spontaneously emerging play or facilitated by adults) and to help children in the selection of music materials. Ferrari and Addessi (2014) investigated whether and how teachers could facilitate the use of the ‘Interactive Reflexive Musical System’ during free-play and guided activities. Findings showed that teachers’ strategies stimulated children to think in terms of
sound and develop a genuine desire to “play” with music and dialogue musically with the system. Using observations and interviews, Ehrlin (2015) investigated how principals from three Swedish preschools encouraged teachers to utilize music not only as a “teaching tool” for stimulating children’s language and social development, but also as a subject that is important in itself. Adopting an arts-integrated perspective, Phillips et al. (2010) evaluated the impact of the program ‘Promoting and Supporting Early Literacy through the Arts’ in a community-based preschool setting. Preliminary results revealed improvements in young children’s emergent literacy on a number of targeted and standardized measures after participation in the program. This study shows how visual and performing arts may be integrated throughout the preschool curriculum, documenting the positive influence of arts integration in improving at-risk young children’s emergent literacy skills and school readiness.

Aside from arts education, the early childhood literature contains numerous observational studies focused on characterizing the quality of teacher-child interactions, conducted primarily in United States preschools. According to Hamre et al. (2012), teacher-child interactions are the daily back-and-forth exchanges – both instructional and socio-emotional – that teachers and children have with one another throughout each day. There is evidence that the nature and quality of these interactions are among the most important factors in determining the impact of early childhood programs on children’s development and learning (Pianta et al., 2005). In Mashburn et al. (2008), for example, effective instructional support (e.g., providing high quality feedback and supporting the development of thinking skills) was associated with greater gains in expressive and receptive vocabulary, letter naming and math skills in pre-school, while effective emotional support (e.g., developing positive relationships with children and being sensitive to children’s needs) was
related to gains in social competence and academic development, and decreases in problem behaviors. The literature indicates that preschool children are likely to experience instructional support of mediocre to low quality (Pianta, 2016).

**Goals**

The overall purpose of this study was to map the landscape of arts education pedagogical practices in Singapore preschools. More precisely, the study had four goals that involve the examination of: (1) The frequency of the various art forms observed in the classroom; (2) The types of settings in which arts education pedagogical practices are observed; (3) The interactional and instructional features of arts-related teaching and learning practices; and (4) The availability and accessibility of arts-related activities and materials in the classroom.

Findings from this study can be interpreted as baseline data on how NEL’s curriculum for *Aesthetics and Creative Expression* is being enacted at the classroom level. This information has the potential to inform the work of art education curriculum designers, teacher educators and professional development providers. In addition, this study contributes to enrich the limited classroom-based arts education research literature at the international level, particularly in Asia, where the focus on the arts within formal education settings has been traditionally minor (Bautista, Ng, Múñez, & Bull, 2016). Hence, the comparison between our findings and those from Western studies will be relevant to arts education researchers.

**Method**

**Participants**

This study was conducted within the scope of the ‘Singapore Kindergarten Impact Project’ (SKIP), a first large-scale study on preschool education in Singapore. The overall goal of SKIP was to examine how the preschool environment and
pedagogical practices, together with home factors, influenced children’s learning and developmental outcomes and predicted their readiness for primary school. For the purposes of the project, the SKIP team recruited 1538 K1 children from 80 preschools (including kindergarten and child care centers). The sampling strategy targeted centers from a range of social strata, geographical locations, types of provider (both public and private), and whose fees were affordable to local families in Singapore. Private preschools charging high fees, therefore, were intentionally excluded. A wealth of data was collected, including a comprehensive battery to assess changes in children’s academic and non-academic competencies, questionnaires about the child’s home environment and teacher characteristics, and classroom observations to measure program quality with regard to structural and process factors.

The present paper drew on the dataset of classroom observations conducted at the 80 preschools. In total, data were collected from 113 Kindergarten 1 classrooms (4-5 years). All teachers were female. Their mean age was 34.2 years ($SD = 10.4$) and their teaching experience as preschools teachers was 6.9 years on average ($SD = 5.7$). All but four of the teachers indicated that their qualification was specific to early childhood education and/or development. Most teachers (66%) indicated that their highest academic qualification was a Diploma in Early Childhood Education. Ethics approval was obtained from the authors’ university institutional review board.

**Procedure**

For the purposes of the SKIP project, the classroom observation data was coded according to the ‘Classroom Assessment Scoring System’ (CLASS) (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008) and the ‘Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised’ (ECERS-R) (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005). The team of research assistants in charge of classroom observations ($N = 22$) attended training and received official
certification for the administration and coding of both CLASS and ECERS-R. All research assistants held a Bachelor’s degree in early childhood, psychology, or a related field.

Two research assistants observed and videotaped each classroom for three to four hours (depending on the duration of the program). Because our interest was to capture instances of the regular operations within the participating preschools, we explained to center principals and teachers that our observations should be conducted during a “typical” teaching and learning day. Teachers were given no instructions or directions regarding the content or the pedagogy of the activities to be conducted during observation time. The research assistants completed ECERS-R coding during the school visits, resulting in all classrooms being double coded. Reliability on the ECERS-R was achieved if an observer assigned scores that were within 1 point of a consensus score for 80% of the items across three practice observations in local preschool centers (for more information, see Bull, Yao, & Ng, in press). The individual ratings were discussed immediately after the session to reach consensus, if necessary. To address goal 4, we focused on the two arts-related items of the ECERS-R, namely Art and Music/Movement.

The three to four hour-long videotape corresponding to each classroom was cut into 5 or 6 short video clips. Each clip was 15 to 20 minutes long, approximately. A total of 695 video clips were cut for CLASS coding. These 695 video clips constitute the data sources that we utilized to address goals 1, 2, and 3 in the present study. Coding of the data was completed by research assistants who had not completed ECERS-R coding for the same classroom. CLASS reliability was achieved if an observer assigned codes that were within 1 point of the master code for 80% of all CLASS dimensions across five online video segments.
**Data analysis**

Based on the scholarly literature and the Singapore’s NEL curriculum framework (MOE, 2013), we designed three independent coding schemes to address research goals 1, 2, and 3, respectively. The coding schemes were content-validated by two researchers with experience in arts and music education, who assessed the suitability of the analytical categories for the observations under consideration. Prior to final coding, definitions were revised and further refined in several occasions until inter-rater reliability was high. Two coders independently analyzed all the video clips that contained evidence of arts education practices. Disagreements between the two coders were resolved through discussion until 100% agreement was reached. Once the coding process was completed, one researcher coded 20% of randomly selected video clips. Cohen’s Kappa reliability index was .90. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, partial percentages, total percentages) were conducted.

To address goal 4, we focused on the results obtained by the 113 K1 classrooms in ECERS-R items 20 (Arts) and 21 (Music/Movement). ECERS-R items are rated on a scale that ranges from 1 (Inadequate) to 7 (Excellent), based on different indicators related to the availability and accessibility of materials and activities. In this study, we first provide the scores resulting from the standard stop-scoring method (i.e., the score assigned corresponds to the lowest level for which all the indicators are fulfilled), followed by a descriptive overview of the presence of the different indicators contained in the Arts and Music/Movement items (frequencies and percentages).
Results

We identified evidence of arts-related practices in 156 of the 695 video clips initially screened (23.7% of the initial total). The 156 arts-related video clips were recorded from 83 of the 113 classrooms observed (73.4%), which suggests that the arts are highly present in Singapore preschools. The presence of the arts within our sample of video clips was higher than the presence of numeracy (observed in 108 video clips, 15.5%) and science (observed in 49 video clips, 7%).

Frequency of the various art forms

Our coding system for this analysis comprised seven categories (see Figure 1). Note that to enhance the depth of our description, we distinguished different manifestations of the same art form, particularly between visual art activities involving 2D and 3D materials (both represented with yellow bars in Figure 1), between music activities involving singing and performing (pink bars), and between activities involving moving to music and choreographic dance (blue bars). Our analytic categories were non-mutually exclusive in nature, as the same video clip could contain evidence of several categories (e.g., singing a song followed by a drawing activity).
Figure 1. Frequencies and percentages of the various art forms observed within the 156 video clips. The same color is used to indicate different manifestation of the same art form.

In decreasing order, the most frequently identified categories were Visual Arts 2D, followed by Singing, and Moving to Music. The categories Drama/Theatre, Music Performance, and Visual Arts 3D were rather infrequent, appearing in less than 13% of the clips. Finally, the category Dance was only observed on one occasion.

Table 1
Types of activities identified for Visual Arts 2D

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Art Form</th>
<th>Frequencies</th>
<th>Partial Percent</th>
<th>Total Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual Arts 2D</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100 (%)</td>
<td>51.3 (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drawing</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting and/or Coloring</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>30.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting and/or Pasting</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collage</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folding and/or Origami</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect the Dots</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marbling Art</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printmaking</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 shows the types of activities identified for Visual Arts 2D, as well as their frequency, partial percent (related to the 80 video clips where Visual Arts 2D was observed), and total percent (related to full dataset of 156 video clips). Note that the categories presented in the table are non-mutually exclusive, as the same video clip could contain different activities pertaining to Visual Arts 2D. The most commonly identified activities involved Drawing and Painting and/or Coloring, which appeared in 54 and 48 occasions, respectively. The following category in frequency was Cutting and/or Pasting, which was observed in 13 video clips. The remaining types of activities, Collage (i.e., gluing up different materials on to a backing to create a picture), Tracing (i.e., follow, copy, or trace a given graphic design), Folding and/or Origami (i.e., folding a paper to create an object such as a plane), Connect the Dots (i.e., draw a line to connect the numbered dots to form a picture), Marbling Art (i.e., using marbles to roll over a paper which has paint on it), and Printmaking (i.e., stamping objects with different shapes/designs onto a piece of paper), were identified in only a handful of cases.

Singing refers to episodes in which children were observed singing songs or other vocal productions, either a cappella or with instrumental accompaniment (using CDs, YouTube, or actual instruments). Table 2 shows the different types of vocal productions identified in the 73 clips where Singing was observed. The use of Traditional Children Songs (nursery pieces such as “It’s a Small World”, “Good Morning”) was observed in 52 video clips, followed by Curriculum-Related Songs (about topics covered in the NEL framework, such as numbers, letters, plants, or animals), which were observed in 34 video clips. Categories such as chanting Rhymes (i.e., rhyming verses), Vocal Improvisations (e.g., inventing new lyrics for existing songs), singing Pop Songs (e.g., 60’s pop songs such as “Itsy Witsy Teenie Weenie”
or Chinese pop songs such as “Little Apple”), the National Songs (e.g., Singapore’s National Anthem), and Religious Songs (e.g., Christian hymns such as “Jesus Loves Me”) were identified in less than 7% of the video clips pertaining to Singing.

**Table 2**
*Types of songs identified for Singing*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Art Form</th>
<th>Frequencies</th>
<th>Partial Percent</th>
<th>Total Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singing</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>100 (%)</td>
<td>46.8 (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Children Songs</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum-Related Songs</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>21.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhymes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocal Improvisations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop Songs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Songs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Songs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song about Musical Concepts</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The category *Moving to Music* focused on instances of children performing locomotor and/or non-locomotor physical movements in response to the sound of music (excluding choreographed dance forms). Table 3 presents the different types of music that children were observed moving to in the 64 video clips available. Note that many of the categories considered here are common with the categories presented in Table 2, as children were often observed singing songs and moving to them at the same time. Interestingly, in all the instances where Traditional Children Songs were observed, children were also asked to perform physical movements, typically following the instructions given by the teacher (e.g., “Stretch your hands over the left arms and touch your friends’ shoulder, following the beat of the song”). In 26% of these video clips, we observed children moving to Non-Vocal Music (typically using
CDs, Internet, or actual instruments), for example jumping or crawling according to tempo of the instruments. The remaining categories (i.e., moving to Rhymes, Pop Songs, Classical Music, National Songs, and Songs about Musical Concepts) were only observed in a handful of cases.

Table 3
Types of Music used in Activities involving Moving to Music

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Art Form</th>
<th>Frequencies</th>
<th>Partial Percent</th>
<th>Total Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moving to Music</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>100 (%)</td>
<td>41 (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Children Songs</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-vocal Music</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chanting Rhymes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pop Songs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classical Music</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Songs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song about Musical Concepts</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Drama/Theatre was only observed in 20 video clips (12.8% of the total). The most frequently identified category was Dramatic Play (e.g., children pretending to be doctors or nurses during learning corners), which appeared in 19 video clips. In contrast, the categories Acting Performance (i.e., based on a written plot) and Dramatic Creations (i.e., free creation of a story plot), were only observed on one occasion each. Music Performance was identified in 19 video clips (12.2% of the total). The category Body Percussion (i.e., children clapping, tapping on their laps) was identified in 13 occasions, followed by playing Melodic Instruments and Percussion Instruments (6 and 5 cases, respectively). Of the 13 video clips in which Visual Arts 3D was observed (8.3% of the total), the three categories Crafts, Recycle Arts, and Sculpture were observed in four occasions each, followed by the two
categories Forming Words with Playdough and Building 3D Geometrical Shapes, which appeared only once in our dataset. Finally, Dance was only observed in one occasion, in which children were asked to dance to a popular Chinese pop song, entitled “Little Apple”, with a set of choreographed dance steps and sequence.

Types of settings in which arts education practices were observed

Drawing on Singapore’s NEL curriculum framework, we defined four analytic categories to describe the types of settings in which arts education practices were observed in the classroom. In decreasing order of frequency, the 156 video clips contained instances of art education within the context of:

a) Integrated Learning Activities (53 clips, 34%), that is, activities focused on content pertaining to several subject matters, including at least one art form. As examples, we observed children drawing the trees in the playground area during an outdoor science lesson, or singing songs related to numbers during a numeracy lesson.

b) Fillers-Transitions (47 clips, 30.1%), defined as brief non-instructional activities intended to keep children occupied and engaged during transitions from one event to the following one, thereby filling the gap during waiting times. For instance, right after a book reading activity, one of our participating teachers asked the children to sing the songs “My Puppy” and “Seven Days” along with some physical movements, while the group transited to the area of the preschool where lunch was being served.

c) Learning Center Time (45 clips, 28.8%), during which children work together in small groups within thematic learning corners without the continuous direct supervision of the teacher. Note that preschool classrooms in Singapore, similar to other countries, typically include learning corners devoted to a
variety of learning areas (e.g., literacy, numeracy, science, arts). In other words, not all children engage in arts-related work during learning center time. For example, we often observed groups of children wearing costumes and pretending to be professionals (e.g., doctors, nurses, fireman) within dramatic play corners, or working in collaborative visual art projects with their friends, while other children worked in corners containing materials such as books, puzzles, blocks, or science-related materials.

d) *Solely Arts Activities* (37 clips, 23.7%), specifically planned and conducted to teach children exclusively about arts-related concepts or processes. The example referred to above in which children were taught about the differences between *staccato* and *legato* through a song serves to illustrate this category.

Note that arts-related activities were most frequently observed within the context of *Integrated Learning Activities*, whereas *Solely Arts Activities* was the least frequent setting. Moreover, note that the four analytic categories were non-mutually exclusive, as the same video clip could showcase arts-related activities in more than one type of setting. In one of the video clips, for example, we could observe the children completing worksheets that required drawing (which was coded under *Integrated Learning Activities*). Upon completion, they proceeded to the various learning corners, where some of the children engaged in arts-related activities such as dramatic play (coded under *Learning Center Time*).

During the coding process, we noticed that certain art forms tended to predominantly appear in specific settings but not in others. To achieve a better understanding of the data, we analyzed the associations between the various art forms and the four types of settings. We conducted this analysis focusing exclusively on the 131 video clips that had been coded under one type of setting only (that is, *Integrated*
Learning Activities, Fillers-Transitions, Learning Center Time, or Solely Arts Activities). Table 4 presents the results of this analysis.

The results indicated that the presence of the various art forms differed in the four types of settings considered. First, Integrated Learning Activities was primarily associated to Visual Arts 2D, and to a lesser extent Singing, Moving to Music, and Music Performance. Second, the most commonly observed art forms during Fillers-Transitions were Singing and Moving to Music, which indicates that what children are primarily asked to do while waiting or transiting from one activity to the next one corresponds to the broader category ‘music & movement’. Third, Learning Center Time seems to be the context primarily used by teachers to engage children in Drama/Theatre activities (especially within corners designed for dramatic play) as well as in Visual Arts projects involving 2D and/or 3D materials. Finally, most of the cases coded under Solely Arts Activities were coded under Singing and Moving to Music. Note that the larger percentages belonged to categories with relatively low frequencies (Music Performance and especially Dance), which indicates that the art forms that are most uncommon in the classroom tend to be incorporated more formally.
Table 4
Frequencies and percentages of art forms identified in the 131 video clips coded under a single type of setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Art forms</th>
<th>Visual Arts 2D</th>
<th>Singing</th>
<th>Moving to Music</th>
<th>Drama/Theatre</th>
<th>Music Performance</th>
<th>Visual Arts 3D</th>
<th>Dance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Types of Activity</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated Learning Activities</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fillers-Transitions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Center Time</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solely Arts Activities</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34.7%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interactional and instructional features of arts-related teaching and learning practices

To tackle our third research goal, we defined 13 indicators focused on general interactional and instructional features of the arts-related practices being carried out, including the nature of verbal communication between the teacher and students (e.g., types of questions asked) and the overall classroom climate observed (see Table 5). Coders indicated the presence or absence of these 13 indicators/features in the recorded classrooms. In this analysis, we excluded the videos coded as Fillers-Transitions because the setting is non-instructional in nature (Stan & Popa, 2014). We only considered the 104 video clips that had been coded under the categories Integrated Learning Activities, Learning Center Time, or Solely Arts Activities (38, 37, and 29 video clips, respectively).
The frequencies and percentages presented in Table 5 suggest that classroom climate during arts-related instruction is predominantly positive. Students are typically attentive and focused on the task at hand. The teachers are responsive to children’s comments and ideas, showing affection and encouragement frequently, which contributes to create a positive learning environment. However, while the activities implemented by the teachers are engaging (hands-on, practical) and children seem to enjoy completing them, the instructional approach is product-oriented. There are pre-established expectations regarding the result/s that students are to achieve, with clear boundaries between what is right and what is wrong. Even though the classroom climate is not oppressive or negative, the teachers tend not to provide children with opportunities for self-expression or creativity. Activities rarely allow children to think ‘out-of-the box’. Teachers tend to ask yes/no questions and questions with a single valid answer, while open-ended or reflective questions are more seldom observed. The instructional style is directive and very structured. Interestingly, while teachers often give verbal instructions on how to carry out the activities at hand, they seldom provide explanations regarding the concepts involved in the activities, thus missing opportunities to enhance children’s conceptual understanding. Teachers rarely encourage children to ask questions or enquire further regarding the activities being carried out or modify the lesson plan based on children’s interests or ideas, which denotes lack of flexibility.
Table 5
Interactional and instructional features of arts-related teaching and learning practices (104 video clips)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poses engaging learning activities (hands-on, practical)</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are attentive and focused on task</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher shows affection and/or encouragement to students</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks yes/no questions</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides verbal instructions on how to carry out the activity</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks questions with one simple valid answer</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher is responsive to students and provides feedback</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asks open-ended questions</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generates enthusiasm, motivation, and/or curiosity about the art activity at hand</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allows freedom, self-expression, creativity and/or think out-of-the-box</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides explanations about arts-related concepts, ideas, or procedures</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages students to ask questions and/or enquire further</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modifies the arts-related activity based on students’ ideas, questions, interests, etc.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Availability and accessibility of arts-related activities and materials

A total of 113 K1 classrooms were observed and coded according to ECERS-R items 20 (Arts) and 21 (Music/Movement). As explained earlier, ECERS-R items are rated on a scale that ranges from 1 (Inadequate) to 7 (Excellent), based on different indicators related to the availability and accessibility of materials and activities (in this case, amount of arts or music/movement materials and activities observed in the classroom, frequency with which children are allowed to use them, frequency of opportunities for individual self-expression, etc.).

Utilizing ECERS-R standard stop-scoring system, in which a score is assigned when all the indicators for that particular level are met, most classrooms scored in the inadequate range: $M = 1.18$, $SD = .49$ for item 20 (Arts) and $M = 1.96$, $SD = .21$ for
item 21 (Music/Movement). Although there were a reasonable variety of arts and music/movement activities and materials available in these classrooms, children were rarely allowed to freely access them due to the rigidity of schedules (particularly for half-day programs). This lack of opportunities for free-choice resulted in low scores for accessibility to arts and music/movement activities and materials. However, we noticed that many of the classrooms observed displayed higher indicators that were not reflected in the overall scores, due to the logic of the standard stop-scoring system.

To obtain a more accurate picture of the availability and accessibility to arts-related materials in Singapore preschools, below we provide some descriptive statistics from the various ECERS-R indicators. In item 20 (Arts), we found that even though arts-related activities and materials were available in most preschools observed (70 of the 113 classrooms, 61.9%), there was only a minority of classrooms in which these were varied and accessible for a substantial portion of the day (16, 14.2%). In only one third of the classrooms (35, 31.0%), we observed some activities being directed by children’s own interests and everyday experiences. However, very limited evidence of individual self-expression could be observed during such activities.

Regarding item 21 (Music/Movement), we found that in almost all the classrooms observed, teachers initiated at least one music activity daily (112, 99.1%) and at least one movement or dance activity weekly (109, 96.5%). Only occasionally teachers were observed conducting music activities aimed to extend children’s understanding of music (23, 20.4%) or exposing children to a variety of music genres (27, 23.9%). Children were allowed to engage (or not) in music activities in only one
classroom (0.9%). Finally, in none of the classrooms observed were musical materials (e.g., instruments) freely accessible to children for a substantial portion of the day.

Discussion and conclusions

In our large dataset of observations conducted in Singapore Kindergarten 1 classrooms (4-5 year olds), we identified evidence of art-related practices in approximately one quarter of the total video clips edited for CLASS coding, and in three quarters of the total number of teachers who participated in our project. This suggests that the arts play a relatively important role in Singapore’s preschool education. Moreover, similar to other large-scale studies conducted in Western countries (e.g., Winton & Bussye, 2005), our dataset indicates that the presence of the arts in preschools might be higher than learning areas such as mathematics and science.

The first goal of this study was to examine how frequently Singapore preschool teachers used the various art forms with children in the classroom. Results show that while certain art forms are commonly observed (particularly Visual Arts 2D, Singing, and Moving to Music), others are rather infrequent (Drama/Theatre, Music Performance, Visual Arts 3D, and especially Dance, which was only observed in one occasion). These findings are relatively aligned with the study by Zupančič et al. (2015), conducted in Slovenia, which reports that preschool teachers attribute the greatest importance to visual arts and music. This might explain, at least partially, why these specific art forms are more frequently observed than others in the preschool classroom. In our viewpoint, these results are concerning as they show that children’s degree of exposure to certain art forms is very minimal. On the one hand, preschool education in Singapore is not introducing children to forms of expression that are integral to the cultural heritage of societies (Gadsden, 2008). On the other hand, we
know based on research that the different art forms contribute to the acquisition of different cognitive, social, communicative and/or motor skills. Thus, one might argue that not exposing children to certain art forms might potentially limit their own holistic development (e.g., Hallam, 2010).

The uneven presence of the various art forms in the classroom might be due to multiple factors. For example, NEL’s learning goals for *Aesthetics and Creative Expression* (MOE, 2013a) use high level of generality when referring to the various art forms, which are condensed under the label “arts, music or creative movement”. This might have conveyed to teachers the wrong idea that more specific forms of artistic expression and activities should not be addressed in the classroom (Gadsden, 2008). Another contributing factor might be time constraints. As many preschool programs in Singapore are short (3 hours per day), teachers might not have sufficient time to address all forms of art more evenly. Furthermore, the NEL does not propose an optional frequency with which the various art forms should be introduced or taught to children, which might lead teachers to just focus on those activities with which they feel most competent and comfortable. In fact, based on the content covered in Singapore pre-service teacher education programs (PQAC, 2008), we suspect that many preschool teachers might not feel adequately prepared to teach *Drama/Theatre, Music Performance,* or *Dance,* due to lack of preparation in these specific art forms (Bautista et al., 2016).

Our second goal was to examine the types of settings in which arts education pedagogical practices take place in Singapore preschools. We found that teachers and children engage with the arts in four different types of settings (*Integrated Learning Activities, Fillers-Transitions, Learning Center Time,* and *Solely Arts Activities*), and that the presence of the various art forms differs across them.
Consistent with current pedagogical discourses in favour of curriculum integration (Todd, 2010; Zupančič et al., 2015), the setting where art-related practices were most frequently observed was that of Integrated Learning Activities. In particular, the types of practices observed primarily reflected the notion of teaching through the arts (Richard & Treichel, 2013), where the arts are used as a vehicle for the teaching of other learning areas in more engaging or enjoyable ways. In line with the NEL framework (MOE, 2013b), it is relatively common for preschool teachers in Singapore to pose activities in which the main focus is literacy, numeracy, and/or science and that also incorporate the arts, typically Visual Arts 2D (e.g., making a drawing connected to the topic at hand) and to a lesser extent Singing (e.g., singing a song about the topic). The second most frequent setting was Fillers-Transitions, brief non-instructional activities intended to fill waiting time gaps (Sotiropoulou-Zormpala, 2012), in which Singapore preschool teachers tend to engage children in ‘music & movement’ activities. The following setting in frequency was Learning Center Time, which according to the NEL curriculum framework, is one of the most conducive environments for purposeful play to occur (MOE, 2013b). In our video database, teachers were observed to engage one or some groups of children in Drama/Theatre activities (especially within corners designed for dramatic play) and/or in Visual Arts projects involving 2D and/or 3D materials, while the remaining groups worked in learning centers containing non art-related materials (e.g., books, puzzles, blocks, science-related materials). Finally, the most infrequent setting was that of Solely Arts Activities, which primarily focused on Singing and Moving to Music. The art forms most uncommonly taught to children in the classroom, namely Music Performance and Dance, were also observed in this setting. The art-focused activities observed
were closely aligned to the ones proposed in NEL’s *Aesthetics and Creative Expression* guide for educators (MOE, 2013a).

Our findings suggest that certain art forms tend to be used in a pervasive manner, being part of both instructional and non-instructional activities, while others tend to be relegated to unstructured settings only (Zupančič et al., 2015). This differential use might implicitly send children the wrong message that certain forms of artistic expression are superior and thus require formal instruction, while others are just forms of “entertainment” (Gadsden, 2008). A more even use of the various art forms during instructional time would be beneficial in this regard.

The third goal of this study was to analyze the interactional and instructional features of arts-related teaching and learning practices. We found that while classroom climate in Singapore preschools is generally positive and children seem to enjoy engaging with the arts, teachers typically focus on providing product-oriented instructions rather than fostering children’s individual creativity and self-expression. In contrast to what contemporary curriculum frameworks propose, both in Western and Eastern countries, our findings suggest that arts-related pedagogical practices in Singapore are primarily *reproductive* in nature (Lum, 2013). Most teachers set expectations regarding the final product that children are to achieve, with clear boundaries between what is right and what is wrong, which limits their imagination and spontaneity. Thinking ‘out-of-the box’ is rarely encouraged. The instructional style is structured, directive, and rather rigid, and children’s ideas or interests are seldom used to modify the lesson plan. Questions are predominantly closed (yes/no, questions with a single valid answer) and children are rarely encouraged to ask questions or enquire further about the activities at hand. In a nutshell, our evidence shows that quality of teacher-child interactions during arts-related instructional time is
mediocre to low, similar to tendencies identified in non art-specific studies conducted in the United States (Hamre et al., 2012; Pianta, 2016).

Finally, our fourth goal was to examine the availability and accessibility of art-related activities and materials in the Singapore preschool classroom. We found that while most classrooms had a reasonable variety of arts and music/movement activities and materials available, children were rarely allowed to access them freely. In other words, materials are available but not accessible, as children are not given opportunities for exploration and free-choice. This could be partially due to the rigidity of schedules, particularly for half-day programs (3 hour-long), which might lead teachers to have children continuously engaged in pre-determined tasks to ensure that the daily learning objectives are met. In fact, it is common practice for Singapore preschool teachers to assign children to a different learning corner each day of the week during learning center time (Habib, Eng, Bautista, & Bull, 2017), in order to guarantee that children are exposed to a variety of materials and activities. These practices are in stark contrast with Western approaches based on the ideas of free-choice and free-play, such as Reggio Emilia and Montessori, where teachers support children-initiated projects by ensuring the availability of and accessibility to resources and allowing children independence in decision-making about what to use and how to use it, at least for a substantial portion of the day (Bond, 2015; McKie et al., 2012).

In line with Western child-centered ideas and principles (Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985), in the NEL curriculum framework (MOE, 2013b) children are conceived as active and constructive creators of knowledge, and as curious, active, and competent learners who can think widely, creatively and explore ideas thoughtfully (Tan, 2007). This conception of the child, however, is not clearly observed in pedagogical practices specific to the arts. Indeed, this study shows that
the distance between the written and the enacted curriculum in Singapore arts preschool education is large (Gadsden, 2008; Todd, 2010). We argue that one of the main contributing factors for this gap is NEL’s conception of the teacher, whose roles and responsibilities are (in our viewpoint) at odds with a child-centered conception of teaching and learning (Leggett & Ford, 2013). In particular, proposing that teachers should systematically establish specific learning goals and be charge of providing children with the necessary resources to achieve such goals, even in (purposeful) play situations, is simply incompatible with the view of children as “protagonist” of their own learning, given that the agency and locus of control in learning is not internal (children) but external (teacher) (Overland, 2013). We are aware that Singapore’s model of the teacher is aligned with traditional Asian cultures, particularly with Confucian values of obedience and respect for elders and authority (Lam, 2015). In addition, this model is aligned with the expectations of the highly competitive, pragmatic, and efficiency-driven Singaporean society, where parents typically demand teachers to deliver explicit instruction and train children in following instructions and rules (Ellis, 2014). Thus, as discussed by Li, Rao, and Tse (2012), this study shows that cultural appropriateness needs to be seriously considered when Western pedagogical ideas are adapted (rather than adopted) in Asian educational systems.

These findings should be considered in the light of certain limitations. Despite the large sample of teachers observed, and even though our sampling strategy accounted for factors such as social strata, geographical locations, and type of provider (including both public and private), we focused on centers charging affordable fees for the majority of families in Singapore. Our findings, therefore, are not representative of private and commercial preschools charging high fees, where
pedagogical practices may be different. Another limitation (applicable to virtually every study that conducts classroom observations) is that teachers were observed only at one time point, and we have to assume that the practices observed on that day are a typical representation of classroom activities and interactions. Future studies aiming to get a deeper insight into pedagogical practices in the arts should ensure more appropriate timing of classroom observations (even if this is not typical of daily experiences).

We conclude that while arts education plays an important role in Singapore’s preschool education, pedagogical practices related to the arts – perhaps as a reflection of Asian values and societal expectations – are primarily reproductive and teacher-led. Findings indicate that Singapore preschool teachers need support to enact the types of art-related practices outlined in the NEL framework, particularly in relation to certain art forms (e.g., visual arts 3D, dance) and to better foster children’s free exploration and access to materials, creativity and self-expression. To ensure that young children in Singapore are able to achieve the four learning goals established for the Aesthetics and Creative Expression learning area (MOE, 2013a), more teacher training courses focused on the various art forms should be offered to teachers (both pre-service and in-service) in order to enhance their knowledge, skills, and confidence with the arts.
References


