Title
“That’s just impossible in my kindergarten.” Advocating for ‘glocal’ early childhood curriculum frameworks

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Abstract
As a result of globalization, kindergarten curriculum frameworks in Asia have been strongly influenced by Western theories, pedagogies, and values. In this paper, we argue that Singapore’s Nurturing Early Learners and Hong Kong’s Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide present key notions that are inconsistent with cultural values that are deeply rooted in these two societies. To overcome the challenges these inconsistencies trigger for teachers, principals, teacher educators, and parents, we advocate for the design of ‘glocal’ (global/local, explicitly hybrid) curriculum frameworks, based on principles that are culturally appropriate and socially situated. Drawing on recent research studies, we analyze current curriculum/practice gaps in relation to the notions of Child-Centeredness, Quality Interactions, Creativity and Self-Expression, and Play. In seeking the global/local balance that is needed in Singapore and Hong Kong, four alternative glocal notions are proposed: Child-Appropriateness, Pedagogical Quality, Arts Engagement, and Child-Led Activities. We conclude there is an urgent need for generating a solid corpus of local research in both jurisdictions, which should guide subsequent curriculum reforms and teacher preparation models. Our final aim is to contribute to early childhood education policy discussions in Asia, against the background of internationalization.

Keywords
Kindergarten education, curriculum, pedagogy, glocalization, hybridization, Singapore, Hong Kong

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INTRODUCTION

That’s just impossible in my kindergarten. I don’t care what the curriculum Guide says. We really can’t do any of that here... No way! This is not America! Parents would complain immediately, so my Principal wouldn’t allow it. And obviously, I don’t want to get fired (laughter).

Collected from an in-service teacher in a Hong Kong local kindergarten, this quote captures some of the challenges resulting from globalization in Early Childhood Education (ECE). In recent years, the phenomenon of globalization has been widely observed in the field of ECE around the world, and notably in Asian societies (Adriany, 2018; Lee, 2018). The trend to homogenize ECE policies and practices has heavily relied on theories, pedagogies, and values from the Western world (i.e., Euro-American nations), with a clear bias for philosophical, epistemological, and ideological perspectives of progressive and democratic education (Gupta, 2006). The dominance of the Western vision of ECE is evident in the widespread use of notions such as child-centeredness, constructivism, developmentally appropriate practices, holistic development, and play-based learning, drawing on the core principle that education should meet the social, emotional, psychological and biological needs of each individual child (Gupta, 2015).

The understanding globally accepted is that children should be at the center of the learning process, and that the goal of ECE should be to foster each child’s uniqueness, individuality, autonomy, critical thinking, creativity, and leadership (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2004). Numerous European and American contemporary curricula (e.g., Reggio Emilia and Montessori approaches in Italy; Early Years Foundation Stage in England; Project Approach and High/Scope curriculum in the United States) are based on this vision of ECE, which currently constitutes a normative ideology worldwide, being doubtlessly understood to be universally valid (Chen, Li, & Wang, 2017). However, certain Western ECE notions are incompatible with cultural values and social mindsets in many Eastern societies, particularly in Asia, which leads to important challenges not only for kindergarten teachers, but also for principals, teacher educators, and parents, as discussed in the next section.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Influence of Globalization on Kindergarten Curriculum Frameworks in Singapore and Hong Kong

In education, the phenomenon of globalization refers to the process by which worldwide influences and trends (e.g., discussions, institutions) end up having a tangible impact on local educational practices and policies. In recent decades, globalization of education “has served prominently as a channel for bringing dominant Western influences into the non-West” (Gupta, 2018, p.12). Indeed, this phenomenon has had a profound impact on educational policies in continents such as Asia, influencing the views of educators about what counts as high-quality teaching, as responsive and effective education, and how teachers and educational leaders should be trained (Adriany, 2018; Lee, 2018).

This paper focuses on kindergarten education in the Republic of Singapore and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China, two former British colonies which are currently two of Asia’s major world cities. In both, the term kindergarten is used to refer to education prior to entering primary school. Singapore currently offers two years of kindergarten education (4 to 6-year-old children), whereas Hong Kong offers three (3 to 6-year-old children). Most kindergartens are privately operated by non-profit or for-profit organizations, running half-day programs (3 to 4-hour sessions) in the
morning or the afternoon, five days per week. While most kindergartens are privately run, kindergarten education is heavily subsidized in both jurisdictions and their respective Governments have structures in place to regulate the sector and supervise the quality of services provided to children.

Singapore and Hong Kong are international metropolises strongly shaped by multicultural forces (Yang & Li, 2020). Often perceived as East-West meeting points (Gopinathan & Lee, 2018), Western influences have clearly impacted upon their educational systems. The influence of globalization can be clearly observed in their kindergarten curriculum frameworks, namely Singapore’s Nurturing Early Learners — hereinafter referred to as “the NEL” (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2013b)— and Hong Kong’s Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide —in short, “the Guide” (Curriculum Development Council [CDC], 2017). Theoretically grounded in developmental and learning theories proposed by Jean Piaget (1896–1980), Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), John Dewey (1859–1952), and Jerome Bruner (1915-2016), both curriculum frameworks are based on the core notion of child-centeredness, according to which children should be the protagonists of their own learning. Children are conceptualized as active and competent learners, who need to explore, experiment, and create in order to construct knowledge meaningfully. Both curricula argue that children should be provided opportunities to freely discover their environment, explore the world, learn through play and play-based pedagogies, and engage in authentic learning experiences to arrive at their own conclusions. The notion of embracing and celebrating children’s individual differences is also pervasive. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to recognize and leverage the links among academic and non-academic learning areas, with the final aim of fostering children’ holistic development. In summary, both the NEL and the Guide fully embrace a Western constructivist epistemological perspective (Essa & Burnham, 2019).

The NEL was designed to harmonize pedagogical practices across Singapore’s kindergarten sector, and ultimately to raise quality standards across the nation (Bull & Bautista, 2018). It was articulated based on a careful examination of high-quality ECE systems across the world, with a special focus on North America, Europe and Australia. The NEL is based on six principles, encapsulated in the acronym “iTeach”, as the basis for best pedagogical practices within the Singapore context, namely: (1) Integrated approach to learning, (2) Teachers as facilitators of learning, (3) Engaging children in learning through purposeful play, (4) Authentic learning through quality interactions, (5) Children as constructors of knowledge, and (6) Holistic development. The NEL proposes that the key stage outcomes of preschool education can be achieved by helping children acquire knowledge, skills and dispositions through six learning areas: Aesthetics and Creative Expression, Discovery of the World, Language & Literacy, Motor Skills Development, Numeracy, and Social and Emotional Development. All six learning areas are conceived to be essential for holistic development. The NEL specifies learning objectives for each learning area, which are presented in each of the six NEL curriculum guides (MOE, 2013a). Note that while kindergartens in Singapore are highly encouraged to follow the NEL, they are not mandated to do so (Bull & Bautista, 2018).

In contrast, Hong Kong’s curriculum Guide must be followed by the kindergartens under the Free Quality Education Scheme (97% of all kindergartens in the territory), which provides subsidies to parents for meeting part of the school fees (Rao, Lau, & Chan, 2018). The Guide aims to ensure children’s balanced development, including their moral, affective/social, cognitive/linguistic, physical, and aesthetic development. Six learning areas closely related to the developmental objectives are covered, namely: Self and Society, Language, Early Childhood Mathematics, Nature and Living, Physical Fitness and Health, and Arts and Creative Expression. The goal is to nurture all-rounded children for life,
fostering in them “a balanced development in the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics, thus achieving the goal of whole-person education” (CDC, 2017, p. 8). Fostering in children an inquisitive mind, an interest in learning and exploration, and the ability and confidence to adapt to the ever-changing world are understood to be some of the requirements to lay the foundations of lifelong learning.

Western Curriculum Principles vs. Chinese Cultural Values

While well-meaning and anchored in the internationally accepted Western vision on how children best develop and learn, the core principles of the NEL and the Guide are somewhat inconsistent with the predominant cultural values and learning attitudes in Singapore and Hong Kong. Despite being cosmopolitan, multicultural (in the case of Singapore, also multiracial), and opened to global influences, both societies have substantially inherited a Chinese cultural legacy, as most of their populations have Chinese background (Gopinathan & Lee, 2018). Traditionally, Chinese societies have been based on Confucianism, a system of social and ethical philosophy associated with values such as respect for authority, conformity, loyalty to good leaders, hard work, collectivism, thrift and emphasis on education (Yang & Li, 2019, 2020). In Confucian heritage cultures, the purposes of learning include perfecting oneself socially and morally, acquiring knowledge and skill for oneself, establishing oneself economically, achieving social status and honor, being respectful and humble to teachers and elders, and ultimately contributing to society (J. Li, 2010). To achieve these purposes, the Chinese learner relies on attitudes such as determination, diligence, endurance of hardship, perseverance, and concentration. The principle of meritocracy reflects the Confucius moral notion of equality of education for all regardless of family background, which in East Asia led to schools cultures dictated by examination systems, for example the highly competitive civil service examination system, established in China in the XVII century to select the most competent and moral individuals to serve the royal court (J. Li, 2010).

Traditional Chinese cultural values and learning attitudes have been strengthened with rapid economic growth and prosperity in Asian societies, which has led to the growth of a middle class with high aspirations for their children. In recent decades, education has been the most determining factor of a child’s economic future in Singapore and Hong Kong (Gopinathan & Lee, 2018). Their mainstream education systems are highly competitive. The approach to developing children’s full potential is still based on the general principle of meritocracy and the practice of academic streaming. As both societies are highly pragmatic, only the most academically capable students are accepted by local universities, which leads to intense competition in national examinations during primary and secondary school. As a result of systemic pressures, the phenomenon of kiasuism (i.e., fear to lose out) has been encultured in families in these societies (Bull, Bautista, Salleh, & Karupiah, 2018). The kiasu mindset of many parents often results in children attending private tuition centers or enrichment classes during evenings and/or weekends for a variety of activities (e.g., reading, numeracy, phonics), and even kindergarten children attending several ECE programs (Bull et al., 2018; Wong & Rao, 2020).

While these practices are firmly discouraged by Singapore’s MOE and Hong Kong’s Education Bureau, parents continue to focus on providing their children with an academic advantage, which is seen as the key to success in life (Wong & Rao, 2020). Parents take education very seriously, have high academic expectations, and demand that teachers prepare children to succeed in a competitive system where discipline, effort, and efficiency are required. Moreover, as the ECE sectors in both cities are mostly private, parents see themselves in a position to decide how their children should be taught, often requiring didactic teaching styles, classroom dynamics that train children to sit quietly and listen
attentively, and academically oriented curricula to prepare children for primary school (Chan, 2016; Rao et al., 2018).

These misalignments between what national curriculum frameworks in Singapore and Hong Kong propose, on one hand, and what their respective societies actually demand, on the other hand, trigger important challenges for the various stakeholders involved in kindergarten education (Chan, 2016; Lau & Grieshaber, 2018; Lim-Ratnam, 2013). For example, while teacher educators are expected to teach about globally accepted ECE theories and practices in their courses, many often complain that such training will not be applicable by students in local settings. Consistently, student teachers in higher education institutions (both pre- and in-service) also complain about the pronounced gap between what is taught in programs and the real world (Gupta, 2018; Ødegaard, 2015). Frontline teachers have the daunting responsibility of translating Westernized curriculum notions into action, often with little professional training, with numerous constraints of time and space, and under tremendous parental pressures (Chen et al., 2017). Finally, kindergarten principals need to show evidence that their kindergartens align with national curriculum guidelines, in order to fulfill accreditation requirements and/or ensure financial support, while responding to the demands of parents (e.g., the clients), who frequently favor the acquisition of pre-academic knowledge and skills (Bull et al., 2018; Rao et al., 2018).

In recent studies, many scholars have accepted that the NEL and the Guide should be implemented accurately in kindergartens, hence adopting Western ECE notions without critically assessing their applicability and suitability in the local context, and have emphatically argued that more efforts should be made to better train kindergarten teachers and educate parents so that Western-based pedagogies become the norm (e.g., Bautista, Ng, Múñez, & Bull, 2016; Chan, 2016; Lau & Grieshaber, 2018; Leung, 2020; Lim-Ratnam, 2013). In contrast, our argument in this paper is that efforts should be also made to revise the curriculum frameworks themselves, as discussed in the following section.

Postcolonial Theory, Glocalization, and Hybrid Curriculum and Pedagogy

An increasing number of ECE scholars argue that instead of transplanting Western ECE theories, pedagogies, and values into Asian curriculum frameworks, adapting them to the characteristics of local contexts is a much more sensible, viable, and productive strategy (e.g., Chen et al., 2017; Cheung, 2016; H. Li, Rao, & Tse, 2011; Yang & Li, 2018, 2019). Similarly, we claim that a necessary step to ease the tensions experienced by the key kindergarten stakeholders in Singapore and Hong Kong will be to revise the NEL and the Guide in culturally sensitive and socially situated ways.

The framework of postcolonial theory is particularly powerful to better understand how the juxtaposition of diverse perspectives may occur (Gupta, 2018). When educational discourses typically viewed as dominant/marginalized—or colonizing/colonized—are conceptualized as cultures with fluid boundaries interacting with each other, then their mutual exchanges will appear as a form of cultural translation, as ideas from one culture become modified and embedded into another culture. In the field of ECE, Ødegaard’s (2015) construct of ‘glocalization’ is also helpful to envision what this revision process of curriculum frameworks could be like. Glocalization involves the co-presence of both universalizing and particularizing principles within local policy frameworks, assuming that policy globalization should not penetrate every aspect of specific cultures. This process of mutual transformation between Western ECE notions and Asian cultural values may lead to the creation of ‘grey areas’, a third space of curriculum hybridity where Western and Eastern practices co-exist and transform each other (Gupta, 2018). The flow of seemingly opposite notions, values, and ideas holds fresh possibilities from a curriculum standpoint, allowing
practitioners to enact them in kindergartens within a third space of pedagogical hybridity (Gupta, 2015).

Based on these theoretical frameworks, we advocate for conceptualizing explicitly hybrid curriculum frameworks for Singapore and Hong Kong, based on ECE notions that are: (a) aligned with the cultural values of Asian societies, particularly those in which the legacy of Confucianism is still somewhat visible, and with the learning attitudes and dispositions of the Chinese learner (J. Li, 2010); (b) responsive to the societal mindsets (e.g., concerns, expectations, demands) that result from systemic pressures (Bull et al., 2018; Wong & Rao, 2020); (c) sufficiently hybrid and open to different pedagogical approaches, and therefore inclusive (Gupta, 2015, 2018); and (d) sensitive to the contextual limitations and constraints in local kindergartens (e.g., space, time, staffing, resources) (Chan, 2016; Lim-Ratnam, 2013). In Vygotsky’s (1978) terms, one could argue that glocal kindergarten curricula would be within the Zone of Proximal Development of those involved in the education of young children (e.g., teachers, principals, teacher educators, parents). In a nutshell, we envision curriculum frameworks that are less aspirational and more realistic, serving as useful guides in the local setting.

METHODOLOGY

This study presents a comparative examination between Western (i.e., Euro-American) ECE curriculum notions and Asian kindergarten curriculum frameworks, specifically the frameworks currently in place in Singapore (MOE, 2013b) and Hong Kong (CDC, 2017). Our comparative examination is based on a series of recent inter-related studies conducted by various scholars, including the authors of this article, and situated within the social-cultural-political context of the two above-mentioned jurisdictions. The studies were selected based on their relevancy and timeliness. The methodology allows for a bibliographic review and investigation on the misalignments between curriculum notions and pedagogical practices in Singapore and Hong Kong kindergarten settings. More specifically, we analyze the curriculum/practice gaps in relation to four notions: Child-Centeredness, Quality Interactions, Creativity and Self-Expression, and Play.

ADVOCATING FOR ‘GLOCALIZED’ CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS

In each of the four sections below, we first describe how Western scholars have conceptualized the notion at hand, followed by specific visions adopted in Singapore’s NEL (MOE, 2013b) and Hong Kong’s Guide (CDC, 2017). Then, we analyze the gaps between current guidelines and actual practices on the ground. Finally, we propose alternative ‘glocal’ notions aimed to find the balance between progressive vs. traditional that is needed in Singapore and Hong Kong.

Child-Centeredness vs. Child-Appropriateness

The first notion we address is that of Child-Centeredness. According to theorists such as Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky, child-centeredness involves considering the ideas, interests, and motivations of children as the starting point of their learning experiences (Essa & Burnham, 2019). In a truly child-centered classroom, children predominantly choose what they want to learn, how to achieve their goals, and how to assess their learning journey. Child-centered teachers do not rigidly adhere to pre-determined schedules. While there are times in the day when teachers need to follow certain routines, they make an effort to be as flexible as possible, minimizing time for direct instruction and teacher-directed activities.

What we observe most of the time in child-centered classrooms are groups of children engaged in their own projects. For example, we could observe a group of children working on their project on mosquitoes (they all love animals, have noticed there are more mosquitoes
than usual in the city, and want to find out why); another group reading and discussing a book on a topic they are interested in, and then searching for more information; the group of art-lovers working on their music composition, which they want to perform and record next week; and the rest of children playing freely in the various learning centers, and often joining the other working groups. The teachers would interact with and provide support to the various groups of children, as needed. In this classroom, we would surely observe constant movement, frequent conversations, high level of energy and noise, and flexibility in terms of what is happening and how things evolve. Towards the end of the day, all children would come back together and share with the rest what they have done and learned. Despite differences, this description could portray a typical day in kindergartens adopting Westernized curricula such as Project Approach, Emergent Curriculum, Reggio Emilia, or Montessori (Essa & Burnham, 2019).

Aligned with the notion of child-centeredness, Singapore’s NEL states that teachers should “Design learning experiences based on interests, needs and abilities” and “Select a theme/story/topic for investigation based on the children’s interests, culture and shared experiences” (MOE, 2013b, p. 96). Similarly, Hong Kong’s Guide poses that “Learning content should be in line with the interests and needs of children and respect individual differences to enable different children to derive satisfaction from learning, and sustain their interest in learning” (CDC, 2017, p. 62). However, numerous observational studies have shown that actual pedagogies significantly differ from the Western ideal of a child-centered classroom. Both in Singapore and Hong Kong, many kindergarten programs are characterized by relatively rigid schedules, with 20 to 30-minute periods, during which all children are expected to participate in the same activity type or lesson (e.g., story time, music, art and craft, physical activities, mother tongue lesson, outdoor play, learning center time, phonics). While the thematic approach is widely used, teachers are typically the ones who decide which theme/topic will be selected (Lau & Grieshaber, 2018). The most prevalent and frequent instructional format is that of one-size-fits-all whole-group activities (Chen & Liang, 2017), during which children have limited accessibility to materials, resources, or tasks of their choice. Time for free choice is rather limited throughout the day (Chan, 2016; Lim-Ratnam, 2013).

These tendencies have been documented in several classroom-based studies conducted as part of the ‘Singapore Kindergarten Impact Project’ (SKIP), a large-scale project on preschool education in Singapore. The resources collected as part of SKIP allowed an insight into how the NEL vision is enacted by teachers, specifically within kindergartens affordable to most Singaporean families (note that commercial kindergartens charging high fees were not included in SKIP). Researchers videotaped 108 K1 classrooms during a full “typical day” (3-4 hours). Educators were given no instructions or directions regarding the content or the pedagogy of the activities to be conducted that day. One of the analysis conducted focuses on the teaching of gross motor skills (Bautista, Moreno-Núñez, Vijayakumar, Quek, & Bull, 2020). In the 63 classrooms where gross motor teaching was observed, activities were predominantly teacher-directed. Children had limited influence, if at all, on lesson content and procedures. Gross motor teaching occurred mainly indoors, with limited exposure outdoors. All children were expected to engage in the same physical activities, with lack of opportunities for unguided practice. Despite this, children were actively engaged in all the activities posed by teachers, showing high levels of participation, interest, and enthusiasm.

Multiple studies conducted in Hong Kong have also documented the limited degree of child-centeredness (as understood by Western scholars) in local kindergarten classrooms (Chen et al., 2017; Z. Li, Yang, & Li, 2020; Yang & Li, 2020). For example, Chen et al. (2017) investigated how kindergarten teachers enact the Project Approach. Drawing on
classroom observations, interviews, and other documentary evidence, it was found that teachers tend to implement this child-centered pedagogy in a teacher-centered way. Indeed, all the projects observed as part of the study were orchestrated by teachers, within a packed classroom schedule. Teachers were observed providing children with demonstrations, explanations, and instructions to complete their respective projects. Children actively engaged in project work, listened attentively to the teachers’ instructions, paid attention to demonstrations, offered ideas, and answered questions accordingly. The authors argue that the project observed would not have been considered authentic, if judged by the strict Project Approach standards. Instead, the participants created a hybrid version of the approach, combining Western influences (certain elements of child-centered contemporary ECE pedagogies) and Eastern influences (teacher-directed Chinese pedagogies in a rather controlled environment, and with important time constraints). Note that this hybrid version would also be regarded as inconsistent with the principles of the Guide (2017).

Taking this research into consideration, we argue that rather than advocating for the Western notion of child-centeredness, local curricula should advocate for the notion of Child-Appropriateness. This local notion would be inclusive of a wider spectrum of pedagogical approaches, from teacher-driven to child-centered. The notion of Child-Appropriateness would propose that children should have a voice in determining what to learn, how to learn it, and how to assess their learnings. However, the one making the final decision could be eventually the teacher, depending on the circumstances. Consistent with Confucian values and societal demands in Singapore and Hong Kong, the notion of Child-Appropriateness would also emphasize that learning experiences in kindergartens should render high levels of engagement, responsibility, and discipline. Teachers would be encouraged to design and implement developmentally appropriate activities that foster active and hands-on learning, experimentation, and as much free exploration as possible. However, curriculum frameworks would also make explicit that contextual realities and cultural ideologies might limit the degree of child-centeredness. Note that this pedagogical fusion between constructivism and instructivism has been described as culturally appropriate for Singapore and Hong Kong (Chen et al., 2017; H. Li, Rao, & Tse, 2012; Yin, Yang, & Li, 2020).

Quality Interactions vs. Pedagogical Quality
The second notion we focus on is that of teacher-child Quality Interactions. Internationally, one of the most widespread conceptualizations of interactional quality is presented in the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a widely used observational tool designed by Pianta, La Paro, and Hamre (2008) in the United States. CLASS is based on the view that children’s sense of themselves is grounded in, and dependent on, human relationships. Strongly based on the principle of child-centeredness, CLASS examines the extent to which preschool teachers respond to the individual needs of each child and create supportive environments that foster exploration, autonomy, critical thinking, collaboration, and leadership. The CLASS organizes teacher-child interactions in three domains, Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support, each consisting of several dimensions related to children’s socio-emotional, behavioral and intellectual development, respectively.

In contrast to this comprehensive conceptualization, the vision of quality interactions in Singapore’s NEL and Hong Kong’s Guide focuses primarily on the Instructional Support domain, which refers to how teachers help children to think, reason, solve problems, and develop new knowledge. Interestingly, references to socio-emotional development and classroom management are not linked to the notion of quality interactions. The Guide proposes that “Teachers should encourage children to actively participate in various activities and give them sufficient time for interactions to experience the norms in social life” (CDC,
Among other suggestions, teachers are encouraged to stimulate children’s thinking and expand their vocabulary by using the method of questioning and guiding them in making predictions. Similarly, the NEL stresses the importance of classroom environments where there is “Sustained conversation between children and teachers” (MOE, 2013b, p. 84). It provides a detailed description of how quality interactions may be fostered:

*Quality interactions involve teachers and children engaging in extended conversations to build on ideas and concepts. Teachers need to be skillful in asking questions and using prompts to engage in conversations and discussions with children. Research has shown that higher-level thinking skills develop when children are encouraged to reflect, predict, question, and hypothesize. As such, teachers need to find ways to facilitate children’s thinking beyond what they already know. Teachers seek to understand children’s thinking and learning process by encouraging them to put into words their thoughts or what they have seen, heard, experienced and learnt. Through conversations and by listening respectfully to what children have to say, teachers reinforce and extend children’s learning and develop their thinking skills.* (MOE, 2013b, p. 54)

Due to time constraints and the rigidity of schedules discussed above, kindergarten teachers in Singapore and Hong Kong lack opportunities to engage in extended conversation with children, both during whole-classroom and small group activities (Chen & Liang, 2017). In the Singapore context, Bautista, Habib, Eng, and Bull (2019) used the CLASS to analyze the quality of instructional support provided by SKIP kindergarten teachers during learning center time. In the 36 classrooms analyzed, quality of instructional support was found to be low to moderate. Teachers provided children with little feedback on their own ideas, provided minimal scaffolding to help them develop new concepts, and rarely modeled or expanded on children’s language. Children were rarely encouraged to ask questions or enquire further about the tasks at hand. Most questions asked by teachers had predetermined (correct) responses, typically aligned with the activity’s intended learning outcomes. Open-ended questions were rare. Children’s ideas and interests were seldom explored by the teachers.

Similar findings were obtained in another SKIP study on *Discovery of the World*, which analyzed typical features of planned and incidental conversations about sustainability (Bautista, Moreno-Núñez, Ng, & Bull, 2018). All the conversations on sustainable development identified in the video database were initiated and led by teachers, who guided the course of the dialogs to a large extent. Most questions asked by teachers had predetermined answers, which restricted children’s possibilities to share their own ideas and arrive at their own conclusions. Teachers were rarely observed encouraging children to ask questions or enquire further about the topics discussed. While teachers built upon children’s experiences and provided real-life examples, their interactional styles tended to be prescriptive, rigid, and somewhat authoritarian from a Western perspective. Note that these interactions could be also interpreted as fostering children’s respect for elders, conformity, and self-control (Yang & Li, 2019).

In Hong Kong, Chen and Liang (2017) investigated the extent to which kindergarten teachers used literal and inferential language within the context of whole-group instruction. Drawing on 20 videotaped sessions, it was found that most teachers’ questions and children’s responses were literal in nature (i.e., centered on factual information, concrete, superficial). In an average whole-group lesson, teachers produced significantly more utterances than children, and the difference in the quantity of teachers’ questions between literal and inferential levels was statistically significant. The same pattern was found for children’s responses: the difference between literal and inferential levels was statistically significant.
Finally, children produced a significantly larger quantity of shorter than longer utterances, mostly in response to yes/no and close-ended questions. In sum, the study suggested that kindergarten teachers’ questions during whole-group instruction tend to be constrained to the literal level, focusing on assessing children’s correct knowledge, recalling factual information, and providing short descriptions. Using videotaped observations, Z. Li et al. (2020) examined the pedagogical interactions of Hong Kong teachers in eight kindergartens classrooms, within the context of literacy-based activities. Surveys and interviews were also conducted before and after the observations, respectively. Findings revealed that while teachers were able to use different scaffolding strategies to maintain reciprocal interactions, literacy activities were characterized by teacher-directed instructions.

These findings suggest that a Western vision of interactional quality, even if limited to instructional support, may not be viable in practice. Whole-group teaching mirrors Chinese traditional culture values of collectivism, and meets the parents’ expectation of high academic performance in kindergartens (Fleer & Li, 2020). Factors such as high teacher-child ratios, tight daily schedules with many whole-class activities, and the fact that Asian children tend to interact with adults differently due to cultural reasons—as compared to what CLASS and curriculum frameworks propose—reveal the need to conceptualize an alternative glocal notion. In our viewpoint, it would be more appropriate for local curricula to advocate for Pedagogical Quality. Given parental expectations for academic outcomes (Wong & Rao, 2020), it is key for teachers to learn how to best design and deliver whole-class lessons and small-group activities effectively, utilizing didactic and communication strategies that maximize children’s interest, motivation, and engagement. Pedagogical Quality is a hybrid notion because it would reflect the legitimate cultural emphasis on teachers passing-on knowledge, skills and attitudes to children (Essa & Burnham, 2019), while acknowledging the importance of the types of verbal exchanges described in current curricula. To inform local curriculum designers in the conceptualization of this notion, researchers should investigate what high-quality didactic interactions look like in Singapore and Hong Kong kindergartens, using bottom-up approaches.

Creativity and Self-Expression vs. Arts Engagement

Third, we focus attention on the curriculum emphasis on Creativity and Self-Expression. Following global trends (OECD, 2004), these notions are presented in connection to artistic and aesthetic processes (e.g., visual arts, music, dance, drama, corporal expression). Western authors (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Fox & Schirrmacher, 2015) pose that creativity in the arts involves three sequential (but recursive) components, namely (1) exploration/discovery of elements, followed by (2) extensive experimentation/improvisation with such elements, and finally (3) creation/composition of original and unique products. It is widely accepted that creative processes may require extensive periods of time (e.g., several weeks). Thus, contrary to misconceptions commonly held among ECE professionals (Essa & Burnham, 2019), it cannot be assumed that any arts/music activity will necessarily foster children’s creativity and self-expression. For example, activities such as signing during transitions or completing a coloring page, while being useful and playing an important pedagogical function, are typically conducted in reproductive ways.

In line with the Western view, the NEL and the Guide recommend teachers to provide sufficient time and freedom for children to express their ideas creatively in the artistic process, and access to resources and materials for them to explore, experiment, create, and assess their own artistic products. The learning objectives outlined by the Guide (2017) in the area of Arts and Creativity are: “To develop sensory abilities and accumulate art experiences; To express feelings and unleash creativity through presenting and creating the arts; and To develop creativity through active exploration in art activities” (p. 47-48). Similarly, the four
learning goals established for *Aesthetics and Creative Expression* in NEL (MOE, 2013a) are: “To enjoy art and music and movement activities; To express ideas and feelings through art and music and movement” (p. 20), “To create art and music and movement using experimentation and imagination” (p. 29), and “To share ideas and feelings about art and music and movement” (p. 33).

However, recent studies have challenged the assumption that children in Singapore and Hong Kong are achieving the above-mentioned curriculum objectives. For example, in the study conducted in Singapore by Bautista, Moreno-Núñez, Bull, Amsah, and Koh (2018), it was found that children in the participating 108 K1 classrooms were rarely exposed to certain art forms and activities (e.g., visual arts 3D, dance, drama, sound exploration, music creation). Their art-related experiences were limited to visual arts 2D (e.g., drawing) and music-and-movement during transitions and routines (e.g., singing action songs). There was limited accessibility to materials and resources (e.g., musical instruments) due to the rigidity of schedules and the fast pace in kindergartens. While classroom climate was normally positive and children seemed to enjoy engaging with the arts, teachers focused mainly on providing product-oriented instructions. The study concluded that teachers in the observed classrooms seldom fostered children’s individual or collaborative creativity and self-expression.

In Hong Kong, Leung (2020) has recently documented the gaps between teachers’ beliefs and practices in visual arts kindergarten education. The author conducted 29 semi-structured individual teacher interviews. While teachers agreed with the importance of creativity and self-expression in the arts, most of them found it difficult to move away from reproductive and product-oriented practices. In theory, teachers believed in children creating their unique artworks by expressing their voices with originality and imagination. In practice, teachers required children to reproduce crafts by following predetermined instructions and focused on the acquisition of art-related skills and techniques. Cheung (2017) has investigated the characteristics of creative pedagogical practice in Hong Kong kindergartens. Drawing on interviews and observations conducted in three representative local kindergartens, the study showed that all participating teachers held similar perspectives about creativity-fostering pedagogies, all relatively consistent with the Western vision outlined in the Guide. However, their actual creativity practices ranged from being strongly teacher-directed to child-centered. The study concluded that the most effective and culturally appropriate way to foster creativity among Hong Kong children involves balancing teacher-directed and child-centered strategies.

With Cheung (2016), we believe that educational discourses on creativity should be culture-specific. We argue that the way in which Singapore and Hong Kong kindergartens operate, with 3 to 4-hour programs with packed schedules, composed of 20 to 30-minute periods, make it very difficult—if not impossible—for creativity and self-expression to emerge. By definition, creativity is unachievable when there is lack of time for free exploration, restricted accessibility to materials and resources, limited freedom of choice, or when activities are just product-oriented (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Fox & Schirrmacher, 2015). Thus, instead of uncritically advocating for creativity and self-expression in the arts, we believe it would be more appropriate for curriculum frameworks to simply refer to *Arts Engagement*, not taking for granted that creativity and self-expression will be necessarily achieved. This glocal notion would be open to different pedagogical approaches (from teacher-directed to child-directed), different types of art-related activities (from reproductive to creativity-fostering), and different teaching styles (from hands-on to hands-off), as recommended by Cheung (2017). Teachers should be encouraged to facilitate the three components of creativity as much as possible. However, it would be important for curriculum frameworks to acknowledge that the degree of exploration, freedom, and choice
given to children could vary depending on multiple factors (e.g., available time, resources in the kindergarten, teacher/child ratio during that particular activity).

**Play vs. Child-Led Activities**

*Play* is the fourth and final curriculum notion we discuss. The term play is typically used to refer to voluntary activities performed for recreational pleasure, self-amusement, and enjoyment (Essa & Burnham, 2019). While play-based learning is the dominant pedagogical approach advocated by international organizations (OECD, 2004), contemporary early childhood curricula present multiple visions of and approaches to play, which may be interpreted along a continuum ranging from *structured* (teacher-directed) to *free* (child-led) play (Nicolopoulou, 2010).

Play theorists have argued that the level of control potentially exercised by teachers in teacher-guided play situations are against the very notion of play. For example, Van Oers (2013) poses that for an activity to be truly *play* and not *work*, children need to: (a) be engaged voluntarily in the activity, with high level of involvement; (b) adhere to rules established by themselves and/or in discussion with others; and (c) have freedom in the way they undertake the activity (e.g., the materials/resources they want to use, how to organize their time, or how the desired final product should look). In contrast, when activities involve the execution of specific actions under externally determined rules, with no freedom to choose how to interpret the rules or execute those actions, activities should be regarded as work, not as play, even if children enjoy completing them—something that, according to Van Oers (2013), happens very frequently. The difference between play and work, therefore, lies in the degree of children’s internal agency and freedom. From this theoretical perspective, many of the play-related constructs proposed by scholars in recent years—for example “playful learning” (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009) and “eduplay” (Rao & Li, 2009)—would not qualify as play, given the high degree of teacher control, the existence of given rules, and the potential lack of freedom to engage (or not) in these activities, mainly designed to better support academic outcomes.

The curriculum frameworks in Singapore and Hong Kong propose different perspectives on play. The main perspective recommended in the NEL is that of *purposeful play*, which falls at the center of the above-mentioned play continuum (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Purposeful play involves activities intentionally planned and orchestrated by teachers to foster intended learning outcomes in children. These activities are typically designed for small groups and take place within environments known as learning centers or corners, which are also carefully designed and equipped by teachers. The NEL encourages teachers to actively interact with children during purposeful play situations, to maximize their learning. In contrast, the Guide advocates for free play, which is defined as follows:

> “Free play” is a behavioral activity evoked by the intrinsic motivation of children. It places emphasis on children’s autonomy and free participation and children are not limited by the rules or pre-set goals established by adults. During free play, children can choose their own tools, ways to play, playmates and activity area. (CDC, 2017, p. 119).

Note that this definition captures the basic requirements for play outlined by Van Oers (2013). However, we believe the Guide presents an important internal contradiction because, while advocating for free play, it recommends teachers to “Design a variety of play in line with the curriculum aims and content” (CDC, 2017, p. 66). Rather than free play, such a recommendation strongly resonates with NEL’s notion of purposeful play.
Bautista et al. (2019) explored the correspondence between NEL’s vision of purposeful play and the pedagogies enacted by SKIP kindergarten teachers during learning center time. While learning centers were set up in all classrooms, child-led activities were only observed in 36 out of 108 K1 classrooms (33%). During these episodes, children were allowed limited freedom of movement and choice, and some children were even required to complete classroom assignments (e.g., worksheets). Teachers were observed adopting mainly facilitative roles, but the quality of the verbal exchanges with children was low. In fact, teachers mainly focused on providing instructions (e.g., “Benjamin, you need to play in the blocks center today. Don’t move around!”) and evaluative feedback (“Good job, Anna! Lily, your drawing is a bit messier”). In Hong Kong, Chan (2016) has found that while teachers believe children should learn through play and have happy learning experiences, they fail in varying degrees to put these beliefs into practice, primarily due to the need to fulfil parental expectations. The study participants reported not being able to provide children with free choice activities daily because, in line with the parents’ demands, they felt the obligation to assign large amounts of homework to prepare children for primary school.

While play and play-based pedagogies are foundational notions in internationally accepted ECE discourses (OECD, 2004), and Singapore and Hong Kong have stressed their importance for decades, numerous research studies and government reports reflect that play practices are still significantly deviated from curriculum expectations (for a review, see Lam, 2018). Contextual constraints (e.g., lack of time and space) and cultural ideologies (e.g., lack of support from school leaders, parental pressures for academic learning) are factors that seem to be difficult to change. Does it make sense to continue to enforce play in curriculum frameworks? In our view, proposing the use of Child-Led Activities would be culturally more appropriate. This hybrid notion would be inclusive of different types of practices, from teacher-orchestrated activities—intended to achieve pre-determined learning outcomes—to activities in which children actually play, with the freedom and lack of external rules that characterize play situations. The glocal notion of Child-Led Activities would not assume that kindergartens will be able to provide the basic conditions for play, as described by Western scholars such as Van Oers (2013), although it would encourage stakeholders to integrate time for play in programs as much as possible.

SUMMARY AND FINAL REMARKS

There is a widespread perception that a ‘good’ school is one that employs an early childhood pedagogy based upon early childhood methods and materials as used in progressive classrooms of the ‘West’. [...] But curricula designed and implemented in the West are based on the understandings of the development and lifestyles of young children who are growing up in the ‘West’. What gets overlooked at the local level is that most of the desired behaviours deemed ‘appropriate’ in these curricula are those that are valued by the socially, racially, and linguistically privileged who most resemble the ‘west’. A ‘form of civilized oppression’ is enacted when a particular set of beliefs about children gets imposed in diverse cultural contexts in this manner (Gupta, 2015, p. 262).

Western and Asian societies, such as Singapore and Hong Kong, clearly differ in terms of their dominant philosophies and cultural learning theories (constructivism vs. didacticism/behaviorism), epistemological beliefs (knowledge construction vs. knowledge transmission), and pedagogical approaches (child-centeredness vs. teacher-directedness) (Chen et al., 2017). For this reason, we believe that establishing Western ECE ideals as “gold standard” in a top-down manner—via curriculum frameworks—is not an effective strategy,
as it leads to the perception among ECE stakeholders that such standard is unachievable, for many reasons. In this paper, we have shown that the NEL (MOE, 2013b) and the Guide (CDC, 2017) rely excessively on notions borrowed from Western educational discourses, which leads to numerous challenges for the various actors involved in the education of young children. To address this problematic, we have claimed that Singapore and Hong Kong need kindergarten curriculum frameworks that are socially situated, realistic, viable, and potentially sustainable (Yang & Li, 2018, 2019).

We have explained that the constructs of glocalized (Ødegaard, 2015) and hybrid curriculum (Gupta, 2015, 2018) would be helpful to guide the revision of these frameworks, taking into consideration local values and other sociocultural and contextual influences. The four glocal notions proposed in this paper constitute a humble contribution in this direction. We believe that the notions of Child-Appropriateness (instead of child-centeredness), Pedagogical Quality (instead of quality interactions), Arts Engagement (instead of creativity and self-expression), and Child-Led Activities (instead of play) would not demand radical shifts, neither in beliefs nor in practices, and would be inclusive of different pedagogical approaches, thereby ensuring sociocultural appropriateness (Chen et al., 2017; Li et al., 2012; Yin et al., 2020).

We suggest that the revision of current curriculum frameworks should be based on a solid corpus of ECE research conducted in Singapore and Hong Kong. Indeed, to guide curriculum designers in the conceptualization of glocal and hybrid curriculum notions, researchers should first explore what high-quality practices regarding these notions look like in local kindergartens, using bottom-up approaches. The feedback of expert ECE practitioners, with knowledge of both global and local pedagogies, would be key in this glocalization process. This feedback should capture the voices of ECE professionals with diverse backgrounds and roles (e.g., curriculum designers, teacher educators, kindergarten leaders, seasoned teachers), and with experience in different types of settings (i.e., local and international kindergartens from multiple providers). The aim would be to integrate globally accepted ECE principles with local values and beliefs, creating third spaces of curriculum hybridity that are conceptually consistent and pedagogically viable on the ground (Gupta, 2015, 2018).

As argued by J. Li (2010), “long-held Western assumptions about processes, efficacy, and effectiveness of learning cannot be readily applied to the study of learners from non-Western cultures” […] because these assumptions “were developed by Western researchers to study Western people based on Western cultural norms and values” (p. 42). For this reason, it would be also key to examine the short-term and long-term impact on local children and families of different ECE programs, based on different pedagogical approaches. Given the diversity and complexity of Singapore and Hong Kong ECE systems (Bull & Bautista, 2018; Rao et al., 2018), findings from this research would allow their respective Governments and societies at large to better understand why some programs succeed more than others in fostering children’s holistic development, academic achievement, and later social adjustment and mobility. In sum, multiple stakeholders should negotiate and discuss the co-existence of global and local principles within the ECE curricula, as both could be potentially adapted, held on to, and/or mutually transformed (Ødegaard, 2015).

In designing glocal curriculum frameworks in Singapore and Hong Kong, it would also be vital to ensure that ECE professionals and parents have a common understanding of national policy goals. In recent years, both Governments have implemented numerous initiatives to educate parents about the importance of Western curriculum notions (e.g., holistic development, play). However, we argue that this top-down approach is ineffective as it does not take into consideration the local mindsets, which are typically the result of systemic demands. Society at large, represented primarily by parent associations, should be
given a central voice, as cultural ideology matters in curriculum innovations (Wong & Rao, 2020; Yang & Li, 2018). As we have recently pointed out:

If parents perceive a preschool’s curriculum to be less academically rigorous, they may take preventative action such as enrolling their children in additional private tuition classes. This exacerbates inequity in opportunities, as lower-income families cannot afford such additional support, resulting in the growth of social disparity when children enter primary school. (Bull & Bautista, 2019, p. 178).

Changing deeply rooted and strongly held cultural perceptions, mindsets, and practices is difficult, and it would be naive to expect radical changes in a short period of time. The Governments in Singapore and Hong Kong should therefore work within the zone of proximal development of their respective societies (Vygotsky, 1978), providing small scaffolds gradually, and engage ECE professionals and parents in constant conversations.

Beyond informing curriculum and pedagogy, the above-referred corpus of Singaporean and Hong Kong research should also guide the content and design of pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development, as well as the training of leaders (Bautista, Wong, & Gopinathan, 2015; He & Ho, 2013). There is evidence that ECE practitioners are eager to continue to improve themselves in all the learning areas, but training them exclusively in Western theories and practices does not seem to be responsive to their actual needs (Múñez, Bautista, Khiu, Keh, & Bull, 2017). To address the challenges related to teacher training that emanate from the forces of globalization, it seems critical to: (a) prepare teacher candidates in theories and practices that are informed by diverse pedagogical ideas, not only Western; (b) create an awareness in teacher candidates of the implications of globalization in ECE settings; (c) prepare them to identify when Western educational discourses are imposed into Eastern societies; and (d) engage teachers in discussions related to multicultural education, cultural diversity, and social justice (Gupta, 2015). These strategies would contribute to preparing glocal kindergarten teachers, ECE professionals who are able to situate practice in the local environment (Ødegaard, 2015).

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