

Group Music Activities in Chinese Kindergartens: Children's Engagement and Teacher Perspectives

Natalie Robertson¹⁾

Hoi Yin Bonnie Yim

Louise Paatsch

Deakin University

Abstract

The paper aims to research group music activities in selected kindergartens in mainland China. Specifically, children's engagement in group music activities and teachers' perspectives of music curriculum practices to engage children are examined. The study was conducted in 44 classrooms across six kindergartens in mainland China. A mixed method research design was used to collect and analyse data. Observations of 1085 children's engagement in group music activities were conducted. A survey and interviews gathered the perspectives of 89 teacher participants about music curriculum practices that engage children. The findings showed that the percentage of children engaged in group music activities was relatively high across the 44 classrooms. Teachers' perspectives of music curriculum practices demonstrated an appreciation of play-based pedagogies to engage children in group music activities. The findings hold implications for the design and implementation of music learning experiences for young children in educational settings.

Keywords : music, engagement, early childhood Curriculum

Corresponding author, ¹⁾ natalie@deakin.edu.au

Introduction

Music is universal – it crosses the boundaries of cultures and generations. Throughout human history, music exists in every extinct and extant culture. The term ‘music’ in the early childhood education context typically includes the activities of singing, listening, playing musical instruments and dancing/moving (Kontos et al., 2002; Temmerman, 2000). In most modernized countries, music has widely been included in both eastern and western curriculum guidelines as one of the key learning areas in the Arts for young children (e.g., Department for Education, 2017; Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009; Education Bureau, 2006).

In order to support young children to fully benefit from music, researchers consistently report that engagement is one of the important elements of children’s overall learning experience (e.g. Custodero, 2005; Fox, 2000; Welch et al., 2004). Engagement, within this study, refers to the amount of time children spend interacting with, or attending to, the learning environment (with adults, other children, or materials) in a developmentally and contextually appropriate way (McWilliam & Bailey, 1992).

The Importance of Engagement in Learning

Engagement has been long used as an indicator of the quality of children’s learning experience within the field of early childhood education (e.g., Berliner & Rosenshine, 1977; Laevers, 1997, 1999; McWilliam et al., 1985; Ridley et al., 2001; Yim & Ebbeck, 2016). Early childhood researchers confirm that engagement can be regarded as a reliable indicator of the quality of children’s learning environments (Dunst et al., 1986; Ridley & McWilliam, 2001) and program quality (Duncan et al., 2008; McWilliam et al., 2003; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002; Ridley et al., 2000).

As early as the 1970s, for instance, engagement has been used to assess the suitability of planned learning activities in early childhood settings (Doke & Risley, 1972; Krantz & Risley, 1977; LeLaurin & Risley, 1972). In the 1980s-1990s, engagement was used to evaluate the quality of environments for young children (Dunst et al., 1986; McWilliam et al., 1985). Researchers agree that children who attend to and interact with their environments are more

likely to develop learning competencies (Dunst et al., 1986; Favell et al., 1983; Favell & Risley, 1984). Other researchers have looked into the measurement of individual children's engagement (McWilliam & Bailey, 1995; McWilliam & Ware, 1994), which further led to research on supporting individual children's development (Ridley et al., 2001). Engagement can also be used as a dependent variable for assessing the impact of interaction styles between adults and young children (McWilliam et al., 2003). Findings from available research across different eras have shown that observation of child engagement is not only a unique measurement of program quality that looks beyond the structural and interactional features of the education and care environment, but also provides information regarding the quality of children's experiences (Ridley et al., 2000).

In many developed countries, engagement is mentioned in early childhood curriculum guidelines as an important element of children's overall learning. In the United States, for instance, one of the indicators of an effective curriculum as listed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is that "children are active and *engaged*" (2009, p. 1). In Australia, the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) aims to support 'children's active *engagement* with their learning environment' (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009, p. 9). In Hong Kong, the term *engage* is also used regularly across its local early childhood curriculum to highlight to teachers or caregivers the importance of engagement for young children's learning quality (Education and Manpower Bureau HKSAR, 2006, e.g. pp. 25, 27 & 51). Furthermore, in mainland China, where the current study was undertaken, the term *engage* was highlighted consistently in the national curriculum guideline (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). Despite the emphasis on supporting children's engagement within both local and international curriculum contexts, there appears to be limited research studies that investigates young children's engagement, generally and in particular in music (e.g., Custodero, 2000; Temmerman, 2000; Yim, 2009). This study, therefore, focuses on young children's engagement in music activities in selected kindergartens in mainland China. Kindergartens, in the context of this study, are settings that provide full-day education and care to children aged 3 to 6 years.

Engagement and Music Learning

Music teachers and researchers since the early 1970s have consistently agreed that engagement is an important element for high quality music learning experiences for young children (e.g. Bayless & Ramsey, 1991; Begley, 2000; Kujawski, 1996; Neelly, 2001; Temmerman, 2000; Yim, 2009). In one study, British music education maestro, Keith Swanwick, emphasized that “I am certainly of the view that music is one of the most important forms of human discourse and that musical engagement has profound consequences beyond its immediate experience” (Welch et al., 2004, p. 242). In the United States, Custodero (2005, p. 206) highlighted that engaging children in music activities is “infinitely complex” but “rewarding”. Furthermore, Fox (2000) among others (Hallam, 2016; Rogers, 2018) have consistently reported that active engagement in music fosters children’s brain development. Similarly, music educational experts argue that young children’s engagement in music activities lays the foundation for all learning (Bridges, 1994; Kraus et al., 2014). Specifically, Russell-Bowie (2008, p. 44) states that “engagement in a quality music program helps children develop self-discipline, social and cooperative skills; discover an enjoyment in listening to a variety of different styles of music; learn about different cultures through their music...and ...have fun!”

These statements from different educational professionals around the world support the underlying premise of this study that engagement in music is an important element to support young children’s learning. Although engagement is generally accepted as one of the important elements to support young children’s overall learning, including music, there is little research that explores children’s engagement in music activities especially in the East (Yim, 2009). This study, therefore, focuses on young children’s engagement in kindergartens in music activities in mainland China.

In mainland China, the Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2012) identifies five learning domains, comprising of health, language, social study, science (including mathematics), and the arts (including music). The main objectives of the arts (including music) curriculum includes fostering experiences, appreciation and enjoyment of art (including music), providing opportunities for children to experiment with artistic expression and learn about arts (including music) in the environment

and daily life (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). Specifically, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2012) emphasizes that the arts (including music) curriculum must foster a freedom of children's individual and creative expression without emphasis on artistic skills, techniques and standards as this could be harmful for children's emotional and individualistic development. In addition, the Guidelines for Kindergarten Education in mainland China recognizes that the music curriculum has the potential to support learning in other developmental areas.

Curriculum Practices of Music Education for Young Children

In order to provide quality music education for young children, teachers and researchers need to continue to address an important issue – that is, how should music be taught? Such a question of 'how' is always important, as Csikszentmihalyi reminds us that it is "not only what should be taught to children that is important, but also how it should be taught" (1975, p. 20). Generally, early childhood teachers conduct six common types of music activities with young children: 1) singing; 2) dancing/moving; 3) playing instrument(s); 4) music listening; 5) watching music-related video(s); and 6) talking about music-related topic(s) (Bridges, 1994; Kazimierczak, 2004). Although music is generally listed as an important element in national curriculums in most countries, there is little research that explores how music is taught to young children attending early childhood educational settings. This study, therefore, focuses on curriculum practices of music education for young children in mainland China.

In early childhood education, curriculum is typically developed with a play-based focus (Arthur et al., 2018). Specifically in mainland China, where this study was conducted, the Guidelines for Kindergarten Education guides educators to view play as the basic activities in kindergartens with education being embedded in daily lives and play (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012). Research identifies that it is common for play-based practices to be employed when designing and delivering music curriculum in early childhood education (Littleton, 1998). However, these play-based approaches are commonly adult-initiated and led, which may affect the engagement and interest that children

demonstrate in music and musical activities (Littleton, 1998; Niland, 2009). Specifically, Littleton (1998) reports that it is a common teaching common practice for group music activities to engage children in clapping or singing games, music and movement activities, and/or a musical learning that is integrated within pretend play. In China, there has been limited research conducted into group music activities in early childhood education. However, research has indicated challenges with implemented play-based curriculum due to the influence of local culture and pressure from parents (Chen-Hafteck & Xu, 2008). Furthermore, Cheung et al. (2017) researched the perspectives of pre-service early childhood teachers in Hong Kong. They suggest that teachers may lack confidence teaching in a play-based curriculum because they are most familiar with didactic and rote teaching and learning practices that are traditionally used in Chinese societies.

Reporting on the findings of a study that examined children's enjoyment of group musical activities, Koops and Kuebel (2018) conclude that adult-led group activities may not always be the best approach to promote enjoyment. As enjoyment is linked with children's engagement and learning, they, among others (Knudsen et al., 2019; Kulset, 2016) suggest that fostering children's choice and agency needs to be considered when designing kindergarten music curriculum. However, there is a lack of research that examines children's engagement in group musical activities, especially in the Chinese context.

Based on this aforementioned context, the present study was devised to gain insight into children's engagement in group music activities and teachers' perspectives of music curriculum practices for young kindergarten children in mainland China. Early childhood teachers are defined in this study as those who work with children aged 3-6 years old in kindergartens. The research aimed to examine teaching practices used in group music activities and how these practices supported children's engagement. The research questions investigated in this study were:

1. What percentage of children are engaged in group music activities in selected early childhood settings in mainland China?
2. What are teachers' perspectives of children's engagement in group music activities?
3. What are the curriculum practices of music education for children aged 3-6 years in selected early childhood settings in mainland China?

Method

Participants

Three different groups of participants were recruited from *a non-profit making early childhood organisation* in mainland China. To maintain confidentiality, the identity of the organisation has not been disclosed in this paper but is named as '*the Organisation*'.

The Organisation values the importance of music in young children's lives and stipulates that music was timetabled as part of the daily group activity for young children. Teachers have access to *the Organisation's* music curriculum guideline developed in 2014-15, and the many music resources in the settings (e.g., CDs, musical instruments). Six kindergartens (including teachers and children) located in four provinces governed by *the Organisation* were invited to participate in the study. After ethical approval was sought, the following three participant groups across all six kindergartens agreed to participate:

- (1) Twelve teachers participated in the individual interviews. These teachers worked with children aged three (K3) to six years (K5). All teachers were female and had been teaching the current music curriculum at the *Organisation* between 18 months and 3 years.
- (2) Eighty-nine teachers working across 44 classrooms in six kindergartens at *the Organisation* completed a questionnaire. Fifty-two (58%) teachers had bachelor degrees, 28 held diploma degrees, four with postgraduate degrees, while five did not indicate their level of qualification. All teachers were female with 79% aged between 20 and 29 years, and 17% aged between 30 and 39 years. Twenty-three of the teachers indicated that they had formal music training, two teachers did not respond to this item, while 64 (72%) had not completed any formal music training.
- (3) Approximately 1085 children aged 3 to 6 years across 44 classes were observed. Table 1 presents the number of children distributed across the six kindergartens according to classrooms including: K3 (3-4 years); K4 (4-5 years) and K5 (5-6 years).

Table 1. *Total Number of Classrooms and Children in each of the six Kindergartens*

Early childhood settings	Number of classrooms (3-4 years)	Number of classrooms (4-5 years)	Number of classrooms (5-6 years)	Number of Children
Centre 1	4	3	2	277
Centre 2	3	4	3	249
Centre 3	3	2	2	163
Centre 4	3	3	1	172
Centre 5	2	2	1	89
Centre 6	3	2	1	135
Total	18	16	10	1085

Methods

The study adopted a mixed method design due to its ability to triangulate data in order to delve deeply into the research problem (Creswell, 2014). Quantitative data were collected using the Engagement Check II (McWilliam & Casey, 2008). Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire.

Engagement Check II (EC-II)

The Engagement Check II (EC-II) (McWilliam & Casey, 2008) was used to evaluate the percentage of children engaged in group music activities at a single given time. The EC-II evaluates children's engagement according to five behavioural indicators. They are: a) focussed attention that involves directly watching or listening the teacher or other feature of the lesson; b) serious facial expression and body language that is directed to the activity; c) purposeful manipulation of objects as directed by the teacher; d) communication with peers or adults that is related to the lesson; e) persistence in the lesson. Non-engagement is defined as unoccupied behaviours whereby the child is doing something that is not aligned with the expectations set by the adult within an activity or routine. These behaviours include: a) waiting needlessly, b) waiting even when the child knows what is coming next, c) staring blankly, d) wandering without a purpose; e) crying or whining; f) displaying aggressive or destructive acts; g) breaking sensible rules (McWilliam & Casey, 2008, p. 5).

Upon recommendation from the authors of the Engagement Check II (McWilliam & Casey, 2008), the scale was implemented in each classroom more than once. Observations occurred in each classroom twice, three months apart, using the following procedures of the EC-II:

1. The researcher commenced the observation at the beginning of the music lesson.
2. Children's engagement was scanned for 15-second intervals for a total of 60 times.
3. During each interval, children's engagement was scanned once to count the number of children present. The children were scanned a second time to count the number of children who were not engaged in the lesson.
4. The researcher/s calculated the number of children engaged in the group music activities by subtracting the number of disengaged children from those who were recorded as present in the lesson.
5. The percentage of children engaged at each interval was calculated by dividing the number of engaged children by the number of those present in the music activity.
6. The overall average percentage of children engaged in group music activities was derived by calculating the sum of the percentages of children engaged at each interval and dividing this number by the total number of intervals.

For the purpose of this study, the EC-II was deemed an appropriate tool to investigate the percentage of children engaged in music activities. The EC-II has been found to be a valid and reliable instrument to evaluate children's engagement (Ridley et al., 2000). In the current study, the EC-II was implemented by four members of the *Organisation's* early childhood leadership team. To achieve inter-rater reliability between the research team, all researchers attended a two day moderation workshop whereby classrooms were observed and the researchers came together to talk about what they found. Any inconsistencies were discussed until at least 85% agreement was reached.

Questionnaire

The main aims of the questionnaire were to explore teachers' perspectives of children's engagement in group music activities and to investigate the curriculum practices of music education for children aged 3-6 years in selected early childhood settings in mainland China. The questionnaire was developed in English by the researchers and translated into simplified Chinese language (i.e., the official written language in mainland China).

The questionnaire was distributed to teachers responsible for the delivery of the music activities in the 44 participating classrooms across the six early childhood settings. The questionnaire consisted of 21 items including tick-the-box, Likert-scale and open-ended questions. The 10 tick-the-box items gathered demographic data including participants' age, gender, education qualifications, number of years in the early childhood sector, and the number of years in the current kindergarten that they work in. Five items included in the questionnaire were drawn from the Teachers' Music Engagement Scale (TMES) (Yim, 2009). Likert-scale items invited participants to identify the frequency that they implement music activities with children in their classrooms. These items also collected data related to the teachers' own level of confidence in teaching music and the frequency with which they participated in music activities with their children such as singing and playing musical instruments. The six open-ended questions invited teachers to provide examples of how they supported young children's engagement in music activities and how children demonstrate that they were engaged in music activities. The open-ended questions also invited teachers to comment on their practices to engage children in musical activities and their perspectives of what contributes to a high quality music activity. All responses to the open-ended questions were translated into English by the research assistant who was proficient in both English and Chinese.

Interview

In order to conduct an in-depth analysis of the participating settings' music curriculum practices, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 teachers responsible for the development and implementation of the organisation's music curriculum. Interviews were conducted by phone in Mandarin (i.e., official spoken language in mainland China) by a research assistant and audio recorded for later transcription. All interviews were transcribed into Chinese written language then translated into English for later analysis by a researcher who was proficient in both languages. The 30-minute interviews aimed to investigate the participants' perspectives, experiences and observations of children's engagement in music activities implemented within their settings. Questions also aimed to provide a more in-depth exploration of the curriculum practices for music education in the selected settings.

Responses were collected in relation to exploring the following themes: (1) the aims of their centre's music curriculum; (2) teachers' perceptions of the strategies they used to engage young children in music activities; (3) teachers' perceptions of how children demonstrate that they were engaged in music activities; and (4) teachers' musical experiences with young children.

Analysis

Quantitative data was statistically analysed in IBM SPSS Version 25. An alpha level of $\leq .05$ significance was employed for all statistical tests. Qualitative data, including interviews with 12 teachers and open-ended question responses from the questionnaire, were thematically analysed in QSR NVivo 11.0 using Leedy and Ormond's (2019) 3-step process of a) defining the characteristics of focus; b) breaking down material, and c) coding material at each instance of the defined characteristics.

Results

Percentage of Children Engaged in Group Music Activities in Selected Early childhood Settings in Mainland China

Results showed that the overall mean percentage of children's engagement in group music activities using the Engagement Check II (EC-II) for all 1085 participating children across 44 classrooms in six early childhood settings was 85% ($M = 85.03$, $SD = 7.47$). The percentage of children's engagement was upheld on both two times of observations; time 1 ($M = 83.76$, $SD = 7.40$) and time 2 ($M = 86.29$, $SD = 7.40$), indicating that children's engagement in music activities was consistently high.

The data collected by the EC-II Check was examined using a one-way between groups ANOVA to see if the age group of children in the classrooms affected their percentage of engagement in music activities. Table 2 shows a slight increase in the percentage of children engaged as the age of children within the classes increased. However, there was no statistical

difference between the engagement of children in K3, K4 and K5 classrooms ($F(2, 18.54) = .327, p = .722$). Such a finding suggests that children's engagement in music activities was relatively consistent across the three age groups within this study.

Table 2. *Engagement of Children in Music Activities by Age Group*

	K3 (3- 4 years)	K4 (4-5 years)	K5 (5-6 years)
Engaged	84%	85%	86%
Non-engaged	16%	15%	14%

The consistently high levels of engagement of children in the *Organisation's* music curriculum indicates a high level of quality (McWilliam et al., 2003) in the delivery of music education. In particular, these findings suggest that the experiences within the music curriculum are appealing for children's interests, responsive to children's capabilities and interactive with a child-centred approach (Ridley et al., 2001). Further findings will be presented below that unpacks the practices used within the music curriculum to support high levels of child engagement.

Curriculum Practices of Music Education for Children Aged 3-6 years in Selected Early Childhood Settings in Mainland China

Data from the teacher interviews were analysed to gain insight into the planning, delivery and evaluation of the *Organisation's* music curriculum. Planning for the curriculum was driven by the *Organisation's* overarching aim to promote children's appreciation of music. Participants identified that their curriculum allowed children to experience different aspects of music so they could cultivate music appreciation in different ways. Specifically, they identified children experienced the exploration of emotions felt through music, expression of the self through movement, and rhythm and beat. The following examples from teacher participants illustrate some typical responses from the group:

"...The purpose (of the curriculum) is not about teaching children to sing and perform, but about supporting children to experience the emotions induced by music and to appreciate different styles of music, experience"

"...I hope they (children) are able to experience different feelings and emotions through music. For example, some music link with happy mood, some link with sadness. I hope the children in my class can feel and experience... whether they can sing many songs or not, that's not the key point...they should attain the skills to appreciate different kinds of music"

"...the curriculum doesn't force the children to sit down or to sing the song in tune with the piano... we don't do that. We support children to feel the music... They are expected to appreciate, to feel, to express and create.... children don't feel like they are learning to sing a song, they feel like they are playing, creating with their life experiences"

These findings suggest a view that by promoting children's appreciation of music, teachers hope that children will develop an interest and passion for music so that they can '*become music learners and music creators*'. Engagement is found to be higher in learning experiences when children are interested in the topic (McWilliam et al., 2003). Therefore, by having a high level of children's engagement in the music curriculum, the findings suggest that the *Organisation* has achieved their aim to promote children's interest.

This paper focuses on the delivery of group music activities within the *Organisation's* curriculum. To uncover the experiences provided to children within group music activities, the questionnaire asked the participants to identify the type and frequency of experiences they delivered. Singing, movement, playing instruments and listening to music were the most frequently implemented activities in group music activities. Discussions about music and music videos were the least frequently implemented activity per week. The high frequency and wide range of activities reflect the teachers' aim to promote children's appreciation of music by providing different opportunities to experience music in different ways.

To delve deeper into the experiences delivered in group music activities, data from the individual interviews were examined where teachers elaborated on the pedagogical practices they used to engage children in music activities. Specifically, the integration of several activities within a group music experience was the most common curriculum practice. All participants ($N = 12$) consistently commented that they used the context of a pretend scenario (e.g., a theme or story) and used singing, movement and instruments to play out the scenario whilst engaging children in an integrated experience of musical learning.

"...Sometimes I create a story by using 2-3 pieces of music in one activity. I use a story as a thread

that runs through the selected music, so children will experience the music in a story-like scenario”
“...Usually I provide children with a scenario... it (the scenario) arranges one piece of music as an introduction. It prepares another piece of music to facilitate children’s learning once they participated in the activity. Then another piece of music is played so children move”
“...Within this scenario, we listened to music... some children told me that there were lots of animals in the forest. They acted as some specific animals by using physical movement. They imitated animals to sing and dance”

These responses indicate that the design and delivery of group music activities uses a play-based approach. Learning through play is encouraged in early childhood education because play is developmentally appropriate, fosters children’s interests and supports a wide range of intellectual, physical, social, emotional and creative capabilities that foster high-level learning (Robinson et al., 2018). In particular, play that facilitates involvement in pretend or imaginary situations provokes some of the highest and most complex levels of engagement (McWilliam et al., 2003).

The teachers also revealed a wide selection of teaching strategies viewed as best for engaging children. The most frequently identified teaching strategies to elicit high percentages of engagement include; a) open-questioning; b) responding to children’s interests; and c) movement activities. The following examples from teacher participants illustrate some typical responses:

“...the co-teacher usually prepares some guiding questions, such as ‘guess what are they going to do?’ or ‘who will be found?’ or ‘shall we hide teacher W, how can we hide her?’”
“...During the music activities, we identify children’s interests. Once you understand the things that they are interested in, most probably, they would engage in them actively”
“...the music curriculum encourages children to express through body movement... They (children) tend to participate when they are invited to move”

Other less frequently mentioned teaching strategies revealed to engage children in music included the use of visual aids and repetition. The following examples from teacher participants illustrate some typical responses:

“...wind is nontangible which is hard to explain.... I prepared some scarves that they (children) can play with. After two to three months, children asked me to play the music again and they used the scarves to show different kinds of wind, such as gentle wind, wild wind... That activity showed that

children and teachers were deeply engaged"

"...During lunchtime and transition, I play some music performed by the instruments that I've introduced, and invited children to identify the instruments"

The description of teaching strategies used by the teachers indicate children have an active role in the experience. They have provided opportunities to contribute their ideas and teachers are responsive to them. This responsiveness demonstrates flexibility to adjust the experience to meet children's ideas, interests and capabilities in the moment, which is a component of child-led curriculum (Cheung et al., 2017) and may be associated with the higher levels of engagement found in this study.

Teachers' Perspectives of Children's Engagement in Group Music Activities

During the individual interviews, teachers were invited to comment on their perspectives of children's engagement during music activities. Analysis of findings showed that teachers identified some non-verbal behaviours that demonstrated whether children were engaged or not engaged in the activities. The typical non-verbal behaviours that indicated that children were engaged included responsiveness to teachers' actions and instructions, fixed eye contact, and facial expressions. The following sample responses from teachers illustrated their awareness of the importance of observing children's non-verbal expressions and behaviours to determine children's engagement:

"...Children don't lie, you can tell by their excited facial expressions"

"...When a child is engaged, they will be more active to respond to teachers' words and to express their thoughts"

Similar findings were evident in the responses to the open-ended question in the questionnaire that invited teachers to comment on how children demonstrated engagement in music activities. All 89 teachers reported that they observed children's engagement through non-verbal behaviours. Teachers also highlighted that other indicators of children's engagement related to the children's ability to follow the teachers' movements. Here are some examples of teachers' perspectives:

".....active and excited body movement and facial expressions; moving and swinging to the music;

eye-contact to show that they are listening; listen carefully with engaged facial expressions; and express their feelings toward the music in their own ways”

“...copy teachers’ actions; dance and move when teachers play music; and are happy to follow and to imitate teachers’ movements”

In contrast to the findings from the interviews, teachers’ responses evident in the questionnaire showed that verbal behaviours and an awareness of the importance of paralinguistic cues such as pitch, duration and intensity were also strong indicators of children’s engagement in music activities. For example, many of the teachers reported that children demonstrated engagement during music activities when they: *“raised questions regarding their lived experiences and personal views; were able to talk about the rhythm, pitch, speed and personal feelings; interacted with teachers regarding their ideas; and when children were willing to sing loudly and adapt the lyrics.”* In addition, teachers also noted that children were engaged in music activities when they did not get distracted by other activities beyond those happening in the music activities. As two teachers noted, children are engaged when

“...nobody is distracted by things other than the music activities”; and “...they ignore the disturbance and be immersed in music”

While verbal and non-verbal behavioural indicators were perceived to be the most evident behaviour that demonstrates children’s engagement in music activities, the teachers also highlighted that engagement can sometimes be difficult to determine. In particular, some teachers discussed that many children could be highly engaged through listening and watching others while not necessarily showing some of the more salient behavioural indicators such as excited facial expressions and responsive body movements. The sample responses below show how two teachers identified that sometimes children might not be actively engaged but were still engaged in the activities through listening and observations of the class:

“...I think when children observe others, they listen to the music though they don’t move. They stay aside, however, they share the common space with others”

“...children just observe and listen to the music even they are not participating

Teachers acknowledged that there were times when children were not engaged in music

activities. They offered some useful suggestions to positively guide children, such as a) respect and use of children's ideas, and b) ongoing reflection

"...I'd talk to her/him (a child) based on the story and I ask her/him questions. I'd guide her/him to share ideas... For instance, in the activity 'in the garden', I'd ask 'what do you do in a garden?'"

"...children are invited to interact with the teachers by asking 'what ideas do you have' and integrate their ideas into my curriculum"

"...If the children just look at you (blankly), you can tell they may not feel anything. The music might be either irrelevant to their daily lives, or too difficult for them"

These findings indicate the teachers have a high level of knowledge of the children in their classroom and how they learn. Nicholas et al. (2021) highlight that in a high quality early childhood curriculum teachers will use their knowledge of how children in their classroom learn, so the curriculum is responsive to their learning needs. This is important for children's engagement because the learning experiences and teaching practices adopted within the classroom are tailored to the identified capabilities of children (Nicholas et al., 2021).

Discussion

Children's engagement in group music activities in selected settings was consistently high during the six months of data collection. Such a high percentage of children's engagement indicates that children in *the Organisation* may experience high quality learning experiences. In early childhood education, high quality learning comprises of, but is not limited to experiences that are play-based and child-centred, and responsive to children's interests, capabilities and strengths (McWilliam et al., 2003).

The Organisation applied a curriculum approach that Arthur et al. (2018) would classify as an adult initiated and led approach to group music activities. Playful teaching practices are used within the curriculum approach adopted by teachers in the current study, with the aim to promote a life-long appreciation of music, rather than to teach specific music techniques. Playful teaching practices engage with children's innate desire to play, by framing learning within an imaginary context and also allowing children to exercise some degree of agency (Moyles, 2010). Playful practices adopted by teachers in the study used an imaginary context

to explore singing, movement to music and instrument exploration, as well as the opportunity to listen and experience different genres of music according to specific themes or stories that the imaginary content provided.

Whilst this is not a new pedagogical practice to the delivery of group music activities (Littleton, 1998), the high percentage of children's engagement within the current study indicates that the practice is contextually appropriate for the participating children. The playful practice adopted by teachers to deliver music activities align with the Guidelines of Kindergarten Education (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2012) which guides teachers to avoid solely focussing on artistic skills and outcomes that may ignore children's emotional experiences and attitudes. The teacher-participants' practices in this current study support the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China's (2012) objectives to provide experiences and appreciation of the environment, the daily life and the arts through the provision of a wide range of themes and activities. The teacher-participants' practices also provide opportunities for children to be confident to express themselves by incorporating their ideas and interests into activities and making connections with experiences children have in their daily life.

Agency can be difficult to incorporate into group activities, where an expectation for compliance and active participation can negate the opportunity for children's choice. However, teachers in the current study reflected and made on the spot changes to their pre-planned activities to acknowledge and respect children's interests and ideas. Such a practice showed that the teachers were aware of the importance of supporting children's agency. Incorporation of the child's voice through active response to their interests and ideas may have contributed to the high percentage of engagement observed, as children felt a sense of empowerment and belonging through their participation. This is an important consideration as literature has suggested that group activities may not be an efficient approach to engage children in music learning, as lack of choice may not allow an appreciation of music to be developed or for expression to be properly explored (Knudsen et al., 2019; Kulset, 2016; Niland, 2009).

Teachers appeared to have an understanding of the indicators of engagement that is similar to McWilliam and Casey's (2008) definition. However, they highlighted that sometimes children may still be engaged in an activity even if they showed some passive styles of

participation. Teacher-participants reminded that children may not respond actively or hold a visual gaze with the teacher. However, they might still be engaged in the activity by listening to other children. Teachers in other research (Illari, 2018; Koops & Kuebel, 2018) shared this view of engagement. For instance, Koops and Kuebel (2018) investigated teachers' perspectives of the indicators of children's enjoyment within classroom music activities. Whilst the participants agreed that common signs of enjoyment, included indicators of engagement such as visual gaze, active participation and body language, they also identified that some children showed these indicators in different times or modes. For example, some non-engaged children sang the song and performed the actions later in the day. Such behaviours indicated that the children internalised the experiences in their own way. These findings collectively suggest that engagement can look differently for individual children, and different assessments may be needed to accurately capture children's learning experience. Consideration of the child's perspective may also provide an additional lens to the study of engagement in future research.

In summary, the current study has illustrated that the curriculum practices used for group music activities in the selected early childhood settings supported a high and consistent percentage of engagement in young children. Further research could extend the study of engagement in musical activities outside the timetable. In particular, there is a lack of research that examines children's engagement in music during a classroom's scheduled free play (Littleton, 1998). Furthermore, research into children's engagement in music should be advanced by examining the complexity of engagement, whereby the sophistication of activity is observed and evaluated (McWilliam & Casey, 2008). Examination of activity sophistication can delve more deeply into the differences between non-engaged and engaged behaviours in order to explore the curriculum practices that support complex levels of engagement.

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