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Kindergarten Practitioners' Understandings of Musical Creativity: Unveiling Discrepancies Between Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT

Musical creativity has been conceptualised in various ways in the literature, including through components often described as exploration, improvisation, and creation. However, little is known about how practitioners understand musical creativity, particularly in Asian educational settings. This study investigated Hong Kong kindergarten practitioners' understanding of musical creativity, analysing the alignment between their theoretical and practical understandings. Using qualitative methods, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 kindergarten teachers and 10 principals. We asked them to (1) provide an example of a musical activity that fostered children's creativity (practice) and (2) justify why the proposed activity could nurture children's creativity (theory). Content analysis was applied. The musical activities proposed by participants predominantly involved structured activities that focused on repetition, compliance with the teacher's instructions, and proficient singing of specific songs. While the activities proposed were rarely based on these components, practitioners alluded to them in their justifications. This divergence between theoretical and practical understandings of musical creativity could be attributed to training, policy, and cultural factors. We conclude that there is a need to further conceptualise the notion of musical creativity in Hong Kong and similar Asian contexts. Curriculum developers, teacher educators, and professional development providers are encouraged to identify musical activities that are culturally relevant and practically feasible to foster children's creativity in kindergarten settings and develop training courses accordingly.

KEYWORDS:

Musical creativity; Kindergarten education; Pedagogical practices; Music education; Theory and practice

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INTRODUCTION

Musical creativity plays a key role in early childhood education (ECE), fostering children's artistic expression alongside their cognitive and socio-emotional development (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Williams, 2018; Young & Ilari, 2019). There is a widespread agreement among international scholars that musical creativity encompasses components of exploration, improvisation, and creation (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Odena & Welch, 2007). Scholars and curriculum frameworks encourage ECE practitioners to design and implement musical activities that incorporate these key components (Barrett et al., 2021; Tsubonou et al., 2019). However, it remains unknown how practitioners themselves understand musical creativity, particularly in Asian settings. This research explores the alignment between theoretical and practical understandings of musical creativity among Hong Kong kindergarten teachers and principals. The study offers valuable insights for curriculum designers, teacher educators, and professional development providers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Literature Review is structured into three sub-sections. The first one elaborates on scholars' and practitioners' theoretical and practical understandings of musical creativity. The second subsection points out the challenges of implementing musical creativity in practice in Asian contexts (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Odena & Welch, 2007). The last sub-section introduces kindergarten music education in Hong Kong, the context where the study was conducted, and explores how the above-mentioned components of musical creativity are integrated into the local kindergarten curriculum framework (Curriculum Development Council [CDC], 2017).

Scholars' and Practitioners' Theoretical and Practical Understandings of Musical Creativity

Creativity is an important competence that has been investigated from multiple disciplinary perspectives, such as education, psychology, and the sciences (Cabedo-Mas et al., 2025; Kupers et al., 2018). Creativity can be defined as the process of producing unique and valuable ideas and/or products, be it tangible or intangible, through divergent thinking, adaptability, and inventiveness, and finding original solutions to complex challenges through experimentation and innovation (Pinar et al., 2025; Torrance, 1974). In education, the Four-C Model of Creativity (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009) has been widely referenced by scholars (Barrett et al., 2021; Lasky & Yoon, 2020). Educational researchers have emphasised the importance of little-c creativity (i.e., creative thinking and expression that emerge in everyday learning contexts) and mini-c creativity (i.e., personal and novel interpretations of experiences), as opposed to the Big-C creativity (i.e., innovative and distinguished contributions that have a lasting impact on a field) (Helfand et al., 2017; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009; Lasky & Yoon, 2020).

In this study, we investigated the definitions of musical creativity specific to early childhood classroom settings in a practical way, aligned with the little-c and mini-c notions, highlighting that even small prompts or scaffolded activities can enable teachers to guide children toward more creative engagement (Weisberg et al., 2013). Musical creativity has also been conceptualised as involving generative and evaluative thinking processes within musical contexts (Webster, 2002). We do not assume a single, fixed understanding of musical creativity. Rather, we distinguish between theoretical understandings (i.e., how musical creativity is conceptualised or articulated by practitioners) and practical understandings (i.e., how practitioners operationalise musical creativity through examples of classroom activities). We recognise that these forms of understanding may not necessarily align, as familiarity with theoretical concepts does not always translate into classroom practice, and vice versa.

Musical creativity has been defined as "the development of a musical output that is novel for the individual (or individuals) and useful for their situated musical practice" (Odena, 2014, p. 247). According to the Encyclopedia of Creativity by Runco and Pritzker (2020), most definitions of musical creativity emphasise "the production and perception of patterns rooted in basic acoustic parameters like pitch, dynamics, tempo, timbre, rhythm, and so on" (p. 197). McPherson et al. (2012) suggested that musical creativity could be assessed by musical flexibility (i.e., variety and elaboration of musical ideas), musical originality (i.e., uniqueness), and musical syntax (i.e., musical knowledge to provide a logical response). Environments that support sound exploration and free movement, coupled with the availability and accessibility of musical resources, have the potential to foster children's musical creativity skills (Runco & Pritzker, 2020; Siljamäki & Kanellopoulos, 2019).

Musical creativity has been conceptualised in various ways in the academic literature. One of them involves the components of musical exploration, improvisation, and creation (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Odena & Welch, 2007). These components are commonly mentioned in textbooks typically utilized in teacher preparation programmes and academic journal articles from around the world (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Essa & Burnham, 2019; Runco & Pritzker, 2020; Tsubonou et al., 2019).

Exploration refers to children's opportunities to manipulate various sound sources (e.g., environmental sounds, sounds produced with their own bodies, instrumental sounds), thereby uncovering various possibilities for producing sound (Schei & Ředegaard, 2020). Through this process, children learn about key musical elements, often in an implicit way. Exploration may also enhance children's curiosity and knowledge about music (Watts, 2018).

Improvisation involves children playing with and combining sounds, lyrics, and musical elements to improvise music without pre-planned notes, rhythms, or structure (Edmund & Keller, 2019; Moravcik et al., 2013). This process is typically spontaneous. It encourages experimentation and self-expression among children (Higgins & Campbell, 2010).

Creation refers to children creating pieces of music using musical elements such as melodies, harmonies, and rhythms (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019). This process may lead to performances.

Such settings allow children to demonstrate and express their musical understanding and ideas to the audience (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Moravcik et al., 2013).

Early childhood textbooks commonly used worldwide introduce practical examples that foster children's musical creativity, helping practitioners develop their practical understanding (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Moravcik et al., 2013). Practitioners can encourage children to improvise and create simple melodies and/or rhythms on easy-to-use instruments (e.g., handbells, rhythmic sticks), which develop children's understanding of musical concepts and musical self-expression (Moravcik et al., 2013; Sarrazin, 2016). Music-specific pedagogies are seen as holistic approaches to cultivating children's musical creativity (Mabini, 2024). For example, Orff Schulwerk integrates music with movement and speech, emphasising improvisation, creativity, and the use of simple percussion instruments and body percussion (Beegle & Bond, 2016). The Kodály Method encourages a cappella singing for active music-making (Houlahan & Tacka, 2015). Theme-based activities are beneficial for children to integrate music with other learning areas, scenarios, and/or stories to express their ideas and feelings (Chung, 2022; Ho et al., 2024a). Children may create simple melodies and rhythms about their feelings or experiences based on a theme, which helps them connect music as a form of personal expression (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Essa & Burnham, 2019). Finally, textbooks also encourage practitioners to utilise abstract notations to foster children's musical creativity (Upitis, 2019). Children may draw simple shapes and lines to represent different sounds, tempos, and/or dynamics. Then, they assign musical instruments for performance; for example, a circle might represent a drumbeat, and a square could represent a stomp (Sarrazin, 2016; Upitis, 2019).

Little is known about how ECE practitioners theoretically and practically understand musical creativity, particularly in Asian settings. This topic is relevant because practitioners' understandings may be shaped by the nature and extent of music education in their training programmes. In recent years, research has shown that the understanding of creativity in the arts differs between the West and the East (Bautista, Wong, et al., 2025a). In Western countries, ECE practitioners often emphasise creativity that focuses on innovation and uniqueness (Morris & Leung, 2010; Sawyer, 2012). For instance, practitioners organise outdoor activities that encourage children to creatively use eco-friendly and natural materials (e.g., leaves, sticks, and wood) to create unconventional instruments for sound exploration (Refsum, 2007). In Eastern countries, ECE practitioners typically conduct creativity activities that prioritise structure and practical application of skills (Bautista, Yeung, et al., 2025b; Yue & Rudowicz, 2011). The activities are relatively structured and are often designed to reinforce concepts from other learning areas, ensuring that creative experiences are integrated with educational objectives in the local curriculum (Bull et al., 2018; Grieshaber, 2016). The varying understanding across regions further reveals that Western educational approaches identified in textbooks and academic literature may have been introduced into Asian societies without adequate consideration of local cultural values (Bautista, Yeung, et al., 2025b).

In Asian settings, there is a need to define musical creativity in ways that are situated and socioculturally appropriate (Bautista, Wong, et al., 2025a). Glocalisation refers to blending global educa-

tional standards with the values, priorities, and specific conditions of local environments (Bautista, Yeung, et al., 2025b; Emmanuel et al., 2022). Glocalizing musical creativity is especially crucial when considering the unique socio-cultural dynamics of societies such as Hong Kong, where Eastern and Western cultural influences blend intricately (Bautista, Yeung, et al., 2025b; Ho, 2013). Through this glocalisation process, practitioners can develop a unified understanding of musical creativity, which enables them to identify and collaboratively design curriculum and pedagogical activities that are appropriate and viable in local ECE settings (Řdegaard, 2015).

Challenges of Implementing Musical Creativity in Practice in Asian Educational Contexts

Implementing the types of creativity-fostering pedagogies described in the prior sub-section can be problematic in certain ECE settings across Asia, particularly in Chinese societies. These challenges arise from a combination of cultural, training, and practical factors (Bautista, Wong, et al., 2025a; Bautista, Yeung, et al., 2025b).

Regarding cultural factors, Chinese societies strongly value and emphasise children's academic achievement, memorisation, performance, and acquisition of practical skills, which are believed to influence future career success (Kim, 2010; Komatsu & Rappleye, 2018). Parents tend to prioritise learning areas such as mathematics and language over creative exploration and arts education, including music (Ho & Bautista, 2024b; Zhu & Chang, 2019). Consistently, early childhood educators in Chinese societies tend to focus on knowledge acquisition and foster learning in other areas when conducting musical activities with children (Yeung & Bautista, 2023). For example, they incorporate numbers into song lyrics to foster children's mathematical learning. As a result, practitioners in these contexts may conduct fewer activities that explicitly promote musical creativity as described in widely utilized textbooks, particularly when such practices are not aligned with local educational priorities and expectations (Marom, 2018; Rao et al., 2018). Similar challenges have also been noted in other educational contexts (Burnard & Murphy, 2017).

Regarding training factors, early childhood educators and principals in Chinese societies typically receive limited training in musical creativity (Bautista & Ho, 2021b; Wong et al., 2023). They have reported concerns about the quality of their music-specific training, which tends to be too short and theoretical, and predominantly focused on singing and instrumental skills (Bautista et al., 2016; Chan & Leong, 2007). In addition, the pre- and in-service programs do not allocate sufficient time to introducing and practising music pedagogical approaches such as the Orff Schulwerk and the Kodály Method, which integrate movement, speech, singing, and musical play (Bautista et al., 2018). Such preparation may limit practitioners' ability and competence to implement musical creativity activities effectively (Bautista & Ho, 2022; Chung & Ho, 2026; Ho et al., 2024a).

Regarding practical factors, many kindergartens across urban areas of Chinese societies are located in densely populated environments and may face space-related challenges (Ho et al., 2025). Classrooms are typically small and may not easily accommodate the types of musical creativity activities described in teacher education textbooks, such as rhythmic movements in groups and/or

musical instrument setups that require large spaces (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Moravcik et al., 2013). Furthermore, musical activities that foster creativity typically produce a high sound level (Sarrazin, 2016; Upitis, 2019). Given that maintaining order and managing classroom sound levels are important in many educational settings, including Chinese societies, practitioners might refrain from conducting these creative activities in the classroom (Bautista et al., 2018). In terms of resources, musical creativity activities often involve specific resources (e.g., online teaching materials/applications) and/or types of instruments (e.g., Orff instruments) (Beegle & Bond, 2016), which may be unavailable or inaccessible in some schools (Bautista et al., 2021a). All these factors may contribute to influencing how practitioners implement musical creativity in practice.

Kindergarten Music Education in Hong Kong

The current study was conducted in Hong Kong, where kindergartens provide children aged three to six with centre-based education. Most children (approximately 66%) participate in half-day education programs lasting 3-4 hours. The remaining 34% attend full-day programs, which also include care services (Education Bureau, 2024b). Local kindergartens, which are managed by non-profit and private organisations, are overseen and subsidised by a government agency: The Education Bureau (EDB) (EDB, 2022).

Music is included as a subdomain of the learning area "Arts and Creativity" in the Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (KECG) – hereafter the Guide (CDC, 2017). The learning objectives in this learning area emphasise nurturing children's creativity and imagination through a wide variety of free expression, active exploration, and creativity activities. Practitioners are required to provide daily musical activities for children. In half-day programs, children participate in arts (including music, visual arts, drama, and dance) and physical activities for 45 to 60 minutes, while full-day programs are expected to allocate 90 to 105 minutes for these activities. The curriculum encourages musical activities that foster sensory development, self-expression, and creative exploration, such as responding to rhythms, expressing feelings through movement and voice, and exploring different sounds. Practitioners should inspire children's enjoyment of music when conducting the activities in the classroom, ultimately cultivating a lifelong learning attitude towards music learning.

In Hong Kong, kindergarten teachers must at least hold a Higher Diploma in ECE and register as a Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT), which is recognised by the EDB (EDB, 2024a). To become a kindergarten principal, one must hold a Bachelor's Degree in ECE, with at least one year of post-qualification experience, and must have completed a recognised certificate course in principalship (EDB, 2024a). Principals and teachers are required to undergo pre-service teacher training that involves specific coursework and practical training in child development, teaching pedagogies, curriculum planning, and specialised training in various learning areas. The training typically involves one to two courses related to music education, learning basic music concepts and pedagogical approaches for children (Bautista & Ho, 2021b). Some of the early childhood music education textbooks commonly used in Hong Kong are Campbell and Scott-Kassner (2019), Griffiths (2017), and Moravcik et al. (2013).

RESEARCH GAPS AND GOALS

Our review of the literature identified significant research gaps. First, while prior research has recognised the importance of musical activities in fostering creativity among children (e.g., Huovinen, 2021), there is a lack of studies specifically focusing on how practitioners understand musical creativity in Asia, particularly in Hong Kong kindergarten settings. It is, therefore, important to explore local practitioners' theoretical and practical understandings of musical creativity. In addition, previous research on musical creativity has focused on primary and secondary school settings, revealing a research gap within ECE settings (e.g., Cremades-Andreu & Lage-Gómez, 2024). This highlights a need to conduct further studies on practitioners' understandings of musical creativity in ECE settings.

The study has two specific research goals. Goal #1 was to investigate the practical understandings of musical creativity among kindergarten teachers and principals in Hong Kong. Specifically, we aimed to analyse how the musical activities described by practitioners, as examples of fostering creativity, relate to the components of musical creativity (e.g., exploration, improvisation, and creation). Goal #2 was to explore the theoretical understandings of musical creativity among teachers and principals, by analysing their justifications of why the proposed musical activities could foster children's creativity. Such relationships are interpreted in relation to the sociocultural context of Hong Kong kindergarten education.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 30 practitioners in Hong Kong kindergartens, including 20 teachers (18 females, two males) and 10 principals (nine females, one male) in charge of K1-3 children (3-6 years of age). Principals were included because they play a key role in shaping curriculum priorities, pedagogical expectations, and teaching philosophies in kindergarten settings, which may influence how musical creativity is conceptualized and enacted. Including both teachers and principals allowed us to capture perspectives at both the classroom and leadership levels on musical creativity. Regarding the highest level of education, the majority of teachers had a Bachelor's Degree (80%), while the remaining had a Master's Degree (15%) or a Higher Diploma (5%). Nine principals hold at least a Master's Degree (90%). Participants had teaching experience in ECE settings for 5–9 years (46.67%), 20+ years (26.67%), 15–19 years (13.33%), 1–4 years (6.67%), 10-14 years (6.67%). Participants were from different kindergartens across various geographical areas in Hong Kong.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews to explore participants' theoretical and practical understandings of creativity. First, we asked our participants to "Provide an

example of musical activity that fosters children's creativity" (practical understanding). Then, we asked: "Why do you think this activity is good to foster children's creativity?" (theoretical understanding). Follow-up questions were asked throughout the interviews to encourage participants to elaborate on their answers, clarify their perspectives, and provide further evidence or examples (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the authors' university. First, we sent an invitation email detailing the overall purpose of our research to 50 kindergartens across all geographical areas of Hong Kong to recruit teachers and principals as participants. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, and they could withdraw from the study at any point without any adverse effects. Then, we further informed the participants about the interview structure and content. All interviews were conducted through Zoom and were audio-recorded. The first author transcribed the verbal responses for analytical purposes.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were imported into MAXQDA Analytics Pro (VERBI Software, 2019) for data analysis. The authors utilised content analysis to address all research goals and created a coding scheme for each goal (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Regarding Goal #1, we employed a top-down (theory-driven) approach. The analytic codes were informed by the music education literature (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Ho et al., 2025), particularly the three core components of musical creativity in terms of exploration, improvisation, and creation, as well as recurrent features observed in participants' examples (e.g., singing, rhythmic movements, and theme-based activities). These categories were defined prior to coding. As explained above, exploration refers to activities that allow children to freely explore and discover possibilities for manipulating sounds (e.g., body, environmental, or instrumental sounds). Improvisation refers to activities where children combine sounds, lyrics, and musical elements without pre-planned notes, rhythms, or structure. Creation refers to activities that involve creating or composing simple musical ideas, sometimes including opportunities to present or perform them. Regarding Goal #2, we utilised a bottom-up (data-driven) approach. We reviewed the transcripts multiple times, carried out open coding, and identified emerging themes in participants' justifications of musical creativity.

To ensure intercoder reliability and validity, transcripts were coded by two experts, each possessing advanced degrees in early childhood music education and extensive research experience with children in kindergarten settings. The coders discussed discrepancies during the coding process and refined the coding scheme as needed until full agreement was reached. The coding schemes, including all codes and their definitions, are presented in the Results section, where we report the frequencies and percentages of each code. We also include illustrative excerpts from participants' responses to support the interpretation of the findings (Eldh et al., 2020).

RESULTS

Goal#1. Practical Understanding: Activities Understood to Foster Musical Creativity

Goal #1 was to investigate the practical understandings of musical creativity among teachers and principals. Specifically, we aimed to analyse the extent to which the contents of the musical activities understood to foster musical creativity corresponded with the components of musical creativity as defined by international scholars. First, we asked teachers and principals to provide an example of musical activity that fostered children's creativity.

A coding scheme comprising eight analytic codes (see Table 1) was developed for analysing the content of the musical activities proposed by the participants. Note that because of space constraints, Table 1 only presents the definitions of each code. Examples are provided within the main text.

Table 1. Coding Scheme for Musical Content Involved in the Activities

Code	Definition
Music Appreciation/Listening	Appreciating music by understanding and/or describing the parameters and background of a music piece and/or a composer.
Singing	Producing musical sounds using voice, including singing songs, rhymes, and/or chants.
Rhythmic Movements	Responding to music through movement, such as moving to the beat, tempo, dynamics, and/or moving to music freely without teacher direction.
Playing Musical Instruments	Playing conventional and unconventional musical instruments, including melodic and rhythmic instruments.
Musical Activities Involving Music-Specific Pedagogies	Conducting musical activities involving musical teaching approaches, such as Orff Schulwerk and Kodály Method.
Theme-based Activities	Integrating music with scenarios, stories, and/or other learning areas (e.g., language, mathematics, sciences).
Musical Performances	Producing musical performances on stage.
Impossible to Code	The interviewee could not provide any examples of musical activities that foster children's creativity.

The most frequently mentioned content was Rhythmic Movements (60%) (see Table 2). Teachers and principals typically described activities in which children were encouraged to move in response to music. For instance, "Children synchronise their body movements with the music played (Teacher 13)", "When the teacher plays the music, children do different movements, such as raising their hands up in the air and curling their bodies. When the music stops, children share the meanings of the movement(s) they had been doing (Teacher 13)." Theme-based Activities was also commonly mentioned by the participants (50%), in which they often integrated music with other learning areas and/or stories. The activities proposed asked children to imitate sounds within a specific scenario to facilitate learning musical concepts. For example, a principal mentioned that,

> Since typhoon Mangkhut was striking Hong Kong and blowing trees down at that time, we used some music related to the theme of trees for the children to imitate and imagine themselves as a big tree and moving according to the music's tempo (e.g., fast or slow). Ultimately, we would also let the children imagine the state of a tree being blown down (Principal 2).

One-third of the participants mentioned Singing (33.33%). Teachers and principals usually referred to children singing songs, rhymes, and/or chanting. For example, "When I was teaching singing, children fervently followed me to sing, enabling them to master how to sing the song (Teacher 4)." The code Singing also involved children having opportunities to change the lyrics for a song, such as "Children gradually make variations to this song by trying to use lyrics or changing some of the words (Principal 6)."

Playing Musical Instruments was mentioned by seven participants (23.33%). Teachers and principals described activities where they played conventional and unconventional musical instruments with children, for instance, "Children use different instruments to play the rhythms (Teacher 15)." Teachers also pointed out that they asked children to "make use of some recycled materials to create some instruments (Teacher 14)." It was followed by Music Appreciation/Listening (20%). Teachers and principals presented activities such as children learning the parameters and background of a song and/or composer. For example, "Teachers explain the song's origin and the composer (Teacher 6)."

The following were rarely mentioned by the teachers and principals, including Musical Activities Involving Music-Specific Pedagogies (e.g., Orff Schulwerk, Kodály Method) (10%). Teachers and principals proposed activities such as children playing some music games from Orff Schulwerk (e.g., 'The Carnival of The Animals'). This code was followed by Musical Performances (10%). Teachers and principals described activities that involve children producing musical performances on stage. For instance, teachers mentioned, "The whole class produced a Christmas performance on stage with singing and dancing each year (Teacher 3)." Lastly, two participants (6.67%) did not provide any examples, hence it was impossible to code these responses.

Table 2. Musical Content Involved in the Activities

	Overall			Teachers			Principals	
	Freq.	%	Rank	Freq.	%	Rank	Freq.	%
Rhythmic Movements	18	60.00	1st	10	50.00	1st	8	80.00
Theme-based Activities	15	50.00	3rd	7	35.00	1st	8	80.00
Singing	10	33.33	2nd	8	40.00	3rd	2	20.00
Playing Musical Instruments	7	23.33	4th	5	25.00	3rd	2	20.00
Music Appreciation/Listening	6	20.00	5th	4	20.00	3rd	2	20.00
Musical Activities Involving Music-Specific Pedagogies	3	10.00	6th	2	10.00	6th	1	10.00
Musical Performances	3	10.00	6th	2	10.00	6th	1	10.00
Impossible to Code	2	6.67	6th	2	10.00	8th	0	0.00
OVERALL	30	100.00	/	20	100.00	/	10	100.00

Subsequently, we examined the extent to which the examples of musical activity provided by teachers and principals aligned with the components of creativity defined by international education scholars. Table 3 presents each code's names and definitions, with examples included in the main text. Note that the first three codes were non-mutually exclusive (i.e., a single response could be assigned multiple codes as appropriate), whereas the fourth and fifth codes were mutually exclusive (i.e., a single response could only be assigned one of these two codes).

Table 3. Coding Scheme for Components of Creativity

Code	Definition
Exploration	The activity allows children the freedom to explore and discover possibilities for manipulating sounds (e.g., mouth, body, environmental, instrumental sounds). Children learn musical elements (e.g., melody, rhythm, dynamics, pitch, duration, texture, harmony, timbre) through the exploration process.
Improvisation	The activity involves improvisation at a beginning level, allowing children to play and/or combine sounds and/or lyrics together with musical elements without pre-planned notes, rhythms, and/or structure.
Creation	The activity involves creation and/or composition, providing children with opportunities to craft a piece and/or offering them a structured setting where they can do a performance to showcase their musical skills and understanding to the audience.
None of the Above	The activity does not involve any aspect of exploration, improvisation, or creation.
Impossible to Code	The interviewee could not provide any musical activity examples that foster children's creativity.

The musical activities mentioned by more than half of the participants (56.67%) did not involve components of creativity defined by education scholars (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019), namely exploration, improvisation, and creation (see Table 4). Those activities were relatively reproductive, for example, following the teachers to sing, clap beats, and do rhythmic movements. Only 20% of participants mentioned an activity involving Improvisation. For instance, one teacher mentioned that "children try to put the words together as the lyrics and sing the song (Teacher 17)", as well as:

> When we learn musical notes, we have different rhythm notations: quarter notes and eighth notes. So, we can use some musical instruments to play the rhythm. We allow children to exhibit a certain level of creativity. For example, children can move and arrange these rhythm notations to create their own rhythm for a few bars (Teacher 1).

A handful of participants referenced an activity involving Creation (i.e., creating or composing musical ideas, sometimes culminating in performance) (13.33%). For instance, "Children designed dance steps for the entire song, choosing movements and instruments at their discretion. Ultimately, the whole class staged a performance that included both singing and dancing (Teacher 3)." There were four participants (13.33%) who illustrated activities involving Exploration. A teacher mentioned, "We ask the children to use their voice to imitate animal sounds of varying pitch and loudness. For example, the sound levels of some animals are relatively loud, and then they fly higher or lower, faster or slower according to the melody (Teacher 10)."

Table 4. Components of Creativity

	Overall			Teachers			Principals	
	Freq.	%	Rank	Freq.	%	Rank	Freq.	%
None of the Above	17	56.67	1st	11	55.00	1st	6	60.00
Improvisation	6	20.00	2nd	4	20.00	2nd	2	20.00
Creation	4	13.33	3rd	3	15.00	4th	1	10.00
Exploration	4	13.33	4th	2	10.00	2nd	2	20.00
Impossible to Code	2	6.67	4th	2	10.00	5th	0	0.00
OVERALL	30	100.00	/	20	100.00	/	10	100.00

Goal#2: Theoretical Understanding: Justifications for Activities that Foster Musical Creativity

Goal #2 was to explore the theoretical understandings of musical creativity among teachers and principals by analysing their justifications of why the proposed musical activities could foster children's creativity. We asked teachers and principals "Why do you think this activity is good to foster children's creativity?" Participants alluded to diverse elements in their justifications. The codes were non-mutually exclusive. Table 5 outlines the names and definitions of each code, with examples to follow in the main text.

Table 5. Coding Scheme for Elements of Justifications

Code The response refers/alludes to…	Definition
Children's Freedom of Choice/ Autonomy	The activity allows children to have freedom of choice and/or autonomy during the musical activity.
Children's Creation	The activity provides children with opportunities to create music (e.g., simple rhythms and/or melodies, changing lyrics, a performance).
Children's Imagination	The activity provides children with opportunities to utilize their imagination.
Children's Self-expression	The activity provides children with opportunities to express themselves (e.g., ideas, thoughts, feelings).
Children's Experimentation	The activity provides children with opportunities to try and learn from their own experiences.
Children's Enjoyment	Children enjoy the music learning process during the activity.
Meeting Parental Expectations	The activity meets parents' expectations (e.g., generating learning outcomes for their child).
Children's Development of Musical Knowledge	Children acquire musical knowledge from the activity.
Children's Interpersonal Skills	Children develop their interpersonal skills through the activity.
The Uniqueness of Children's Ideas and/or Productions	Every child can present their unique ideas through performances and productions that feature distinctive movements and musical elements (e.g., rhythms and melodies).
The Open-Ended Nature of The Activity	The activity is open-ended, which does not have right or wrong responses and/or outcomes.
Impossible to Code	The interviewee could not provide any musical activity examples that foster children's creativity, or they responded to something unrelated to the question.

Teachers' and principals' justifications predominantly referred to the code Children's Freedom of Choice/Autonomy (36.67%) (see Table 6). Teachers explained that the activities allowed children to have autonomy in selecting the materials and engaging in rhythmic movements without restrictions. For instance, "The activity allows the children to have autonomy. As a result, they would naturally be more courageous to do different actions which were combined with music, instead of sitting still and shyly or indifferently when hearing the music (Teacher 8)." Teachers and principals also referred to another code, Children's Creation (30%), where they explained, "The activity involves something children created from scratch with their efforts after trying out. If the children created any movements or elements in the music which didn't work out finally, they'd be able to feel and see it (Teacher 3)." Participants' responses further referred to Children's Self-expression (20%), noting that the activity allowed children to express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings. For example, "Children have opportunities to express themselves through their body language (Teacher 18)."

The following three elements were mentioned by four participants (13.33%). The first one was Children's Imagination. A participant explained, "The activity was simple. After listening to the story, children had space to imagine what a bear was like. Despite potential differences between children's imagined and real bears, they were still able to mimic them effectively (Teacher 4)." The second one was Children's Experimentation. Teachers and principals pointed out that the activity allows children to try and learn from their own experiences. For instance, "If children want to clap rhythm and it doesn't sound right, they could think it over again. Perhaps children can reduce or add one beat to make it work. These adaptations can stimulate them to think more (Teacher 3)." The last one was The Uniqueness of Children's Ideas and/or Productions. Teachers and principals typically elaborated that every child could present their unique ideas during the activity. A principal pointed out that "The movements were full of children's uniqueness in response to the mood of the music. As such, many different body parts could be engaged in the moves, so I think this was their originality, something particularly creative and well-fostered (Principal 2)."

Several elements were mentioned infrequently in teachers' and principals' justifications. One of these was Children's Enjoyment (10%), where participants noted that children's enjoyment during the activity contributed to their motivation and sense of accomplishment. For example, one teacher explained, "When children really enjoyed the process, they would have a sense of accomplishment (Teacher 5)." Participants also pointed out The Open-Ended Nature of The Activity (10%), emphasising that the activity lacks definitive right or wrong responses and/or outcomes. The following two elements were mentioned by only two participants (6.67%). The first one was Children's Development of Musical Knowledge. Teachers explained, "We teach some music knowledge to children. For example, children can learn from the lyrics in songs (Teacher 1)." The second code was Meeting Parental Expectations. Participants elaborated, "Parents expect that in my curriculum, they can see what their kids can learn in kindergarten in music (Teacher 1)." Lastly, Children's Interpersonal Skills (3.33%) was the most uncommon code mentioned by a teacher. The teacher explained, "The activity enables children to develop cooperation with peers and creativity, while also allowing them to stimulate one another through mutual interactions (Teacher 2)."

Table 6. Elements of Justifications

The response refers/alludes to…	Overall			Teachers			Principals	
	f	%	Rank	f	%	Rank	f	%
Children's Freedom of Choice/Autonomy	11	36.67	1st	7	35.00	1st	4	40.00
Children's Creation	9	30.00	1st	7	35.00	3rd	2	20.00
Children's Self-expression	6	20.00	3rd	4	20.00	3rd	2	20.00
Children's Imagination	4	13.33	7th	2	10.00	3rd	2	20.00
Children's Experimentation	4	13.33	4th	3	15.00	6th	1	10.00
The Uniqueness of Children's Ideas and/or Productions	4	13.33	10th	1	5.00	2nd	3	30.00
Children's Enjoyment	3	10.00	4th	3	15.00	9th	0	0.00
The Open-Ended Nature of The Activity	3	10.00	7th	2	10.00	6th	1	10.00
Impossible to Code	3	10.00	4th	3	15.00	9th	0	0.00
Children's Development of Musical Knowledge	2	6.67	7th	2	10.00	9th	0	0.00
Meeting Parental Expectations	2	6.67	10th	1	5.00	6th	1	10.00
Children's Interpersonal Skills	1	3.33	10th	1	5.00	9th	0	0.00
OVERALL	30	100.00	/	20	100.00	/	10	100.00

DISCUSSION

The musical activities described by Hong Kong kindergarten teachers and principals mainly focused on rhythmic movement and singing. Their practical understandings of musical creativity involved activities typically based on structure, skills, techniques, and repetition. Many of the activities were theme-based and integrated with other learning areas, such as literacy, sciences, and numeracy. Our prior study found that singing and rhythmic movement were the most common practices in Hong Kong kindergarten classrooms, indicating that practitioners' practical understanding of musical creativity aligns with the activities they actually implement in the classroom (Ho et al., 2024a). Overall, the ranking trends of teachers and principals were similar, with only slight differences. Teachers tended to place more emphasis on singing, which requires minimal resources and fits easily into daily routines (Rajan, 2017), whereas principals highlighted thematic learning, which is emphasised in the official curriculum (CDC, 2017).

Despite international literature conceptualising musical creativity in terms of exploration, improvisation, and creation (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Tsubonou et al., 2019), these components were rarely reflected in the activities described by our participants. Practitioners' proposed activities, which reflect their own practical understandings of musical creativity, showed limited

correspondence with the practical examples commonly introduced in early childhood textbooks to foster children's musical creativity (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Moravcik et al., 2013). Notably, two interviewees were unable to provide any examples, and around one-third of the described activities involved none of the components of musical creativity. These findings raise concerns about whether practitioners can implement practices that nurture children's musical creativity, as articulated in the local curriculum guidelines (CDC, 2017).

In terms of practitioners' theoretical understanding of musical creativity, interestingly, their justifications drew on international notions of creativity, including autonomy, self-expression, and child-led exploration (Bautista, Wong, et al., 2025a; McPherson et al., 2012). Practitioners utilised terms that frequently appear in imported textbooks (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019), highlighting that the proposed activities would allow children to create music and express their thoughts and emotions. Several differences emerged between teachers' and principals' justifications. Principals placed greater emphasis on the uniqueness of children's ideas, productions, and imagination, as their leadership role requires attention to broader educational goals and curriculum mandates, positioning these qualities as indicators of higher-order learning outcomes (Kagema, 2019). In contrast, teachers placed more importance on children's experimentation and enjoyment, which reflects the practical needs to foster children's engagement and enjoyment within structured classroom routines (Lu et al., 2023). These differences suggest that while principals adopt a more aspirational perspective, teachers focus on strategies that are immediately applicable and effective in their work (Bautista & Ho, 2021b).

Our findings reveal a notable disconnect between practitioners' theoretical and practical understandings of musical creativity (Bautista et al., 2023). While practitioners' proposed activities most often involve structured and teacher-led activities that offer children limited opportunities for creative expression, they nonetheless justified these practices using language aligned with international discourses of creativity and alluding to the components of creativity more often (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019). In addition, practitioners often referred to Big-C ideals and terminologies such as 'innovation' and 'originality' (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009), probably inspired by what they learn from their pre-service and in-service training (Zhang et al., 2024). This suggests that their training was limited to conceptual knowledge, not extending to practical strategies to infuse musical creativity in everyday classroom practices (mini-c, little-c) (Bautista & Ho, 2021b). Consequently, practitioners' theoretical understandings of creativity seem to be more sophisticated and aligned with globally accepted views than their practical understandings.

This gap can be further understood through the interplay of policy, training, and cultural influences. From a policy perspective, although the Hong Kong curriculum emphasises creativity (CDC, 2017), it offers limited guidance on incorporating these ideals into musical activities effectively. Consequently, practitioners often use official terminologies to show their adherence to curriculum standards. Regarding training, many practitioners learn about international theories of creativity during their pre-service or in-service training programs, which allows them to adopt terminologies such as exploration, improvisation, and creation (Wong et al., 2023). However, they might not

acquire pedagogical strategies or confidence to implement musical activities based on these components, which restricts their ability to employ creative pedagogies such as Kodály or Orff approaches (Ibbotson & See, 2021). Culturally, practitioners might perceive that creative practices cannot be implemented in local kindergarten classrooms due to high expectations of discipline, order, and academic preparation in Asia, including Hong Kong (Komatsu & Rappleye, 2018; Yeung & Bautista, 2023). Nevertheless, they may not fully realise how these perceptions influence their practices that limit children's opportunities for creative exploration (Ho et al., 2024a). These factors help explain why teachers' and principals' theoretical understandings of musical creativity do not fully correspond with their practical understandings.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, our study uncovers discrepancies between the theoretical and practical understandings of musical creativity among kindergarten practitioners in Hong Kong. While their theoretical understanding aligns with international literature by emphasising autonomy, self-expression, and originality (Campbell & Scott-Kassner, 2019; Odena & Welch, 2007), their practical understanding is closely tied to structured, repetitive, and teacher-led activities. This gap reflects a combination of insufficient policy guidance, limited training, and cultural expectations, underscoring the need to conceptualise musical creativity in local settings. Addressing these challenges is essential for supporting the successful implementation of curriculum objectives and enabling children to experience the developmental benefits of musical creativity (CDC, 2017).

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it relies on self-reported data, which may not fully represent actual classroom practices. Future research should incorporate classroom observations or surveys to offer a more thorough view of how practitioners foster children's musical creativity in practice. Second, this research conducted in-depth interviews that allowed for a detailed exploration of practitioners' perspectives. Future investigations should involve a larger sample of participants to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Lastly, this study is situated within the specific context of Hong Kong. It would be beneficial to conduct similar studies in different regions to examine whether similar trends emerge in other educational and cultural contexts.

Implications

Our findings present significant implications for ECE practitioners, teacher educators, professional development providers, and curriculum designers in Hong Kong and globally. This study underscores the importance of clearly conceptualising musical creativity to bridge the gap between theory and practice in Hong Kong and similar Asian contexts (Bautista et al., 2023; Sun & Wong,

2025). Addressing these gaps requires cohesive efforts involving policy and curriculum development, teacher education, and cultural adaptation (Byrne et al., 2024; Saraniero et al., 2014).

Regarding policy and curriculum development, the kindergarten curriculum primarily associates creativity with the arts but has limited connections to other learning areas (CDC, 2017). A rebalance of priorities is needed to facilitate a more holistic integration of creativity. Revised frameworks should provide clear definitions, objectives, and practical examples that illustrate how practitioners can foster children's exploration, improvisation, and creation in musical activities. Such detailed curriculum guidelines could help teachers recognise musical creativity as a continuum from simple variations to entirely new creations (Burnard & Murphy, 2017). For teacher education, practitioners need targeted professional development to equip them with the skills to incorporate creative processes (e.g., improvisation and child-led exploration) into musical activities and explore pathways to musical play (Byrne et al., 2024; Saraniero et al., 2014). Pre-service and in-service programs should emphasise hands-on experimentation and critical reflection, with support from coaching, lesson study, or other collaborative approaches (Collins et al., 2025; Oliver-Barcelo et al., 2022). In terms of cultural adaptation, creative practices need to be responsive to local contexts. Presenting effective models can make musical creativity more accessible and meaningful (Huisman Koops, 2024; Murillo et al., 2021). For instance, the Kodály approach, which emphasises pitch and rhythm through folk songs, could be adapted to local children's songs, while providing opportunities for improvisation and movement (Byrne et al., 2024; Chen, 2025).

Finally, researchers and professional development providers should stress that musical creativity extends beyond singing songs and repetition (Ho & Bautista, 2022; Tse, 2025). By featuring culturally relevant practices and acknowledging limitations and opportunities, practitioners can implement higher-quality activities that offer children long-term benefits from their creative music engagement (Young & Ilari, 2019).

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