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## Child-Directed Learning in Varying Contexts: An Examination of Preschools in the Philippines

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**CHILD-DIRECTED LEARNING IN VARYING CONTEXTS: AN EXAMINATION OF  
PRESCHOOLS IN THE PHILIPPINES**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Early Childhood and Family Development

By

Teri J. Pardue

December 2020

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# **CHILD-DIRECTED LEARNING IN VARYING CONTEXTS: AN EXAMINATION OF PRESCHOOLS IN THE PHILIPPINES**

Early Childhood and Family Development

Missouri State University, December 2020

Master of Science

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## **ABSTRACT**

While it has long been recognized that child-directed learning is a central feature of effective early childhood education, the impact of culture on its implementation is only recently gaining attention. In Asian contexts specifically, previous studies have documented challenges in implementing child-directed learning styles. This study applies holistic analysis to a collective case study of six Filipino preschools, documenting and analyzing their pursuit and implementation of child-directed learning. The study uncovers significant discrepancies among Filipino preschool directors and teachers regarding the meaning of “child-directed” and “play-based” learning, and it identifies apparent cultural barriers to implementing child-directed learning more effectively. The conclusion offers educational and policy recommendations in light of the data and findings, including more culturally relevant approaches to child-directed learning.

**KEYWORDS:** child-directed learning, pretend play, child-initiated activities, open-ended questions, cultural influences on pedagogy, progressive preschool, Philippines, East Asia

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Stephen Pardue, whose constant encouragement and support was necessary for me to ever put pen to paper.

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## INTRODUCTION

There are many buzzwords around early childhood education: *child-centered*, *holistic*, *play-based*, *progressive*, but it is hard to understand what they mean across different cultures and in different settings. Whenever mandates for early childhood education are set in a country (typically with regard to what research has suggested to be best practice) it is important to investigate how these mandates play out in the classroom. This is especially important when looking at early childhood education in an Asian context, since the majority of educational research and definitions of “best practice” are being conducted and defined in a Western context, in countries with different cultural values. Cultural values have a distinct role in this process, as values can affect the way these educational mandates are implemented. The current study focuses specifically on child-directed learning (defined in this study as child-initiated activities, open-ended questions posed by the teacher, and pretend play) in East Asia.

This study assessed the amount of time in which children are engaged in child-initiated, adult-guided, and adult-initiated activities in Filipino preschools located in small cities on the outskirts of Manila, Philippines. It also examined how often the lead teacher asked open-ended questions, and how well the environment facilitated pretend play via an environmental checklist. In addition, director interviews were used to gather data on philosophies of education, beliefs, and aids/barriers which may influence how child-directed learning is implemented in the classroom. The two types of preschools that were examined include (a) traditional Filipino preschools, and (b) progressive/child-centered Filipino preschools.

These two types of preschool seen throughout the Philippines are not distinguished by funding sources nor their governing bodies but provide two unique contexts for children’s

learning. For the purposes of this study, operational definitions that differentiate the two types of preschools were created based on program philosophy, common usage within the Philippines, target demographics, and cost. Traditional preschools are those that are locally run, whose core values are academic in nature, and do not use a progressive or child-centered curriculum or method. Traditional preschools are accessible to the working class and cost less than 25,000 pesos (\$500) per year. The progressive/child-centered preschools are also locally run and operated, but their core values include the words *child-centered* OR *play-based* AND *progressive*. These descriptions can be seen on their websites, as well as in their school literature. These preschools typically have more educational materials and internationally-made toys, equipment, and teaching resources than the traditional preschools and have a tuition that is over 45,000 (\$900) per year.

The current study addressed the following research questions:

- (a) How much time do the schools devote to child-initiated activity, adult-initiated activity, and adult-guided activity?
- (b) How many open-ended questions are posed by the lead teacher in the two types of preschool?
- (c) How supportive are the different classroom environments of pretend play?
- (d) In progressive/child-centered preschools, how do directors' perceptions of important terms relating to child-directed learning (holistic, experiential, child-centered) impact their philosophy of education and the way they conduct their programs?

First, the three types of activity or play (child-initiated, adult-initiated, and adult-guided) must be clearly defined. Adult-initiated activities are activities in which the teacher is in charge. It is expected that the children are listening to the teacher as the expert. The teacher may be leading a gathering or instructional time or explaining an activity or assignment. Activities are also considered adult-initiated if children are working on assignments or activities that they are

required to be doing (for example, seat work). Child-initiated activities are when a child is guiding their own play or learning activity, without a teacher orchestrating or organizing the activity. Adult-guided activities are when a child is provided materials for an activity by a teacher and supported to then try out their own ideas with the materials to come up with a child-led creative solution (Cheung, 2017). Adult-guided activities include both time when the teacher is directing and then a time for children to be free to create and explore. Pyle and Danniels (2017) describe such activities as “lying midway between direct instruction and free play... Children direct their own learning within the established play contexts while teachers enhance the learning experience by playing the role of commenters, coplayers, questioners, or demonstrators of new ways to interact with the materials” (p. 275).

Second, open-ended questions (which were used to gauge how much teachers encourage inquiry) were defined as questions which cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no” but require children to compose a thoughtful answer. Previous research has demonstrated that open-ended questions are important for divergent thinking, a key element of creative thinking, which involves being able to come up with a variety of ideas to solve a problem (Russ & Wallace, 2013). Similarly, Cheung (2017) points out that inquiry “is critical for developing creativity in the early years as it can facilitate children to explore a large number of possible ideas or alternatives. The more children consider other viewpoints, the better are the solutions that can be generated” (p. 75).

Third, it is important to assess to what extent the environment facilitates pretend play, because theory and research suggest that it is through pretend play that children are able to be engaged in some of the most creative thinking (Cremin, Burnard, & Craft, 2006; Robson & Rowe, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978). Pretend play is defined as when children are engaged in play that

involves imaginary roles or objects. This would include, for example, children pretending they are firemen, playing house, or imagining that long blocks are fisherman poles. The current study explores pretend play by examining the classroom environmental support of such play.

Finally, to understand better how culture impacts the implementation of child-directed learning, director interviews were used to shed light on how directors' perceptions of important terms relating to child-directed learning (holistic, experiential, child-centered) affect their philosophy of education and the way they conduct their programs. Research suggests that even if educators value child-directed learning, there may be cultural barriers to implementing it in the early childhood classroom (Chafi & Elkhouzai, 2017; Cheung, 2018; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006; Kwon, 2003). Director interviews were used to see if differing definitions of key terms plays a role in this—as well as other barriers like government or parental expectations and cultural values.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to use these research questions to build a better understanding of what child-directed learning looks like in a Philippine preschool context: where it is observed and in what capacity. The study can also shed light on the continued discussion of how cultural values shape pedagogy in early childhood education, especially as regards the defining of important terminology and the implementation of Western mandates in East Asian contexts.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Previous research is important for understanding the nature and value of this study. Child-directed learning matters because it helps to develop creative and critical thinkers through developmentally appropriate means (Bruner, 1982; Cremin et al., 2006; Davies et al., 2013; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978). This study looks at three specific areas found through research to be important components of child-directed learning: child-initiated activities (Bruner, 1982; Cremin et al., 2006; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969), open-ended questions (Cremin et al., 2006; Fusaro & Smith, 2018; Lee & Kinzie, 2012; Russ & Wallace, 2013), and environmental support for pretend play (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Robson & Rowe, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978).

In addition to the importance of child-directed learning, beliefs about the benefits of child-directed learning have been acknowledged in many places in East Asia and early childhood educational mandates have changed accordingly (Cheung, 2018; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006; Grieshaber, 2016; Kwon, 2003; Peng, 2017). However, even with the adoption of these mandates in East Asia, pedagogical strategies often continue to be impacted by cultural beliefs and values that seem in contradiction to these Western mandates (Bandura, 1978; Chafi & Elkhousai, 2017; Cheung, 2018; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006; Kwon, 2003). This literature includes studies which seek to identify the factors leading to this lack of implementation.

### **Child-Initiated Activities in the Preschool Classroom**

The need for children to direct their own play and activities has been discussed by developmental theorists and suggested through extensive research. Theorist Jerome Bruner, who took a cognitive-structuralist approach to development, emphasized the cultural context in which

development took place (Salkind, 2004) and believed that the most complicated forms of language begin to emerge in children's imaginary play (Bruner, 1982). Sociocultural theorist, Lev Vygotsky (1978), also suggested that when children recreate roles and situations in the world around them through their own play activities, they develop social competence and self-regulation. In addition to Vygotsky's sociocultural approach, Piaget's constructivist approach also argues that children learn concepts when they are integrated into their own activities and everyday experiences, and they get to be active agents in their play (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). When activities are adult-directed, learning tends to be more compartmentalized, and children are passive receivers of knowledge with their own interests and passions often not taken into account (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2010).

Along with developmental theories, research provides a window into the importance of child-initiated activities. Studies have found a positive relationship between child-initiated activities and children's social competence, like peer cooperation and collaboration (Connolly & Doyle, 1984; Ramani, 2012). Studies have also found positive relationships between child-initiated activities and emotion regulation and coping skills (Galyer & Evans, 2006; Goldstein & Russ, 2000; Marcelo & Yates, 2014), as well as problem-solving skills (Goldstein & Russ, 2000). For example, Kontos, Burchinal, Howes, Wisseh, and Galinsky (2002) found in their study of 225 preschool children from 46 different centers in Hawaii that children were most likely to have complex interactions with each other and objects in their environment when they were engaged in creative, child-initiated activities, like building with blocks, doing open-ended art, or engaging in imaginary play.

Classrooms that include child-initiated activities are likely to look different from one another since they build on a teacher's strengths, children's interests, and the school's values;

however, research from Cremin et al. (2006) has identified several consistent themes in child-initiated classrooms. First, teachers in classrooms focused on child-initiated activities often “stand back,” allowing “learner ownership and engagement, fostering autonomy and the opportunity for children to follow their own interests and shape their learning” (Cremin et al., 2006, p 113). Second, there is strong evidence that when children are given opportunities to have control over their own learning—and take reasonable risk—they will be more creative (Craft, McConnon, & Matthews, 2012; Cremin et al., 2006; Davies et al., 2013.) Third, educators in classrooms facilitative of child-initiated activities create time and space for creativity (Cremin et al., 2006; Craft et al., 2012; Cheung, 2017). Physical space fosters independence and can be used flexibly to promote creative thinking. In addition, allowing children sufficient time for extended play activities encourages their involvement and motivation (Cremin et al., 2006; Davies et al., 2013). In light of these three themes, the current study examined how much time children are engaged in child-initiated activities, compared to adult-initiated and adult-guided activities, in the two types of preschools.

### **Open-Ended Questions and Pretend Play in the Preschool Classroom**

In addition to the above benefits of child-initiated activities, current research demonstrates the value of two more characteristics of child-directed learning that encourage creative thinking skills: open-ended questions and pretend play (Russ & Wallace, 2013).

**Open-Ended Questions in the Preschool Classroom.** Cremin et al. (2006) highlighted the importance of asking questions to promote children’s possibility thinking. Possibility thinking allows learners to confront problems from a variety of perspectives by asking “what if...?” Rather than answering more close-ended questions such as, “What is this?” Possibility

thinking opens pathways to more open-ended thinking, like “Where can I go with this?” (Cremin et al. 2006). Possibility thinking and open-ended questions can lead to innovation, being imaginative, and risk taking—important elements for creative thinking (Cremin et al., 2006). This is consistent with the findings of Fusaro and Smith (2018). In this study, researchers presented preschoolers with scientific problems and found that the children who were able to raise questions about the presented problem photos were also able to come up with more solutions to the problems, compared to children who did not ask questions.

Fusaro and Smith’s (2018) findings imply that a child’s ability to problem solve has a positive association with how often they ask questions. Their study explored children posing questions; however, the current study examined teachers’ open-ended questions, because this strategy promotes children’s inquisitiveness and thinking skills. Other research has also shown positive connections between teachers asking open-ended questions and children using higher-order thinking and reasoning (Lee & Kinzie, 2012; Lee, Kinzie & Whittaker, 2012), as well as developing and using more complex oral language skills (de Rivera, Girolametto, Greenber, & Weitzman, 2005; Whorrall & Cabell, 2016). The current study assessed open-ended questions posed by teachers to compare this practice across the two types of preschools.

**Environmental Support for Pretend Play in the Preschool Classroom.** Pretend play has been shown to be a time in which children are engaged in creative thinking and complex learning; thus, creating an environment that fosters inquiry for developing creative thinking skills in young children is important in preschool classrooms. As Vygotsky states, it is in play that children become a head taller (Vygotsky, 1978), meaning they are observed at their most mature (more advanced than their normal daily behavior), or seeming beyond their years (St. John, 2010). Many theories discuss how play fosters creative thinking. Evolutionary theorists speculate



that the amount of time spent playing correlates with a species' flexibility of action (in humans, this includes problem solving) (Russ & Wallace, 2013). Socio-cultural theorists, like Lev Vygotsky, theorize that imagination and the capacity to problem solve develop in children's play (Vygotsky, 1978). Cognitive-developmentalists, Jean Piaget, saw play as the arena where children learn to adapt and assimilate new information, and, therefore, create ideas (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

Growing consensus puts pretend play at the heart of creativity (Cremin et al., 2006). Studies such as Robson and Rowe's (2012) research with 3- and 4-year-olds found that sociodramatic play is linked to creative thinking. Similarly, Hoffman and Russ (2012) concluded from their research that when children showed more imagination in their free play, they also exhibited more creativity in storytelling. The results of Cheung's (2018) study showed that one of the keys to encouraging creative thinking is allowing children to play in ways that give them autonomy and the freedom to choose what to explore and how to go about it. As was evident in their study, children in play are more likely to generate, try out, and evaluate their ideas (Cheung, 2018). When children are playing, numerous cognitive processes are taking place, many of them creative: divergent thinking, storytelling (use of imagination and fantasy), "as if" play, and symbolism (Hoffmann & Russ, 2012). In light of the current research on pretend play and its facilitation of creative thinking, the current study used a checklist to evaluate how supportive the classroom environment is of this type of activity.

### **Child- and Adult- Initiated Activities Across Cultures**

When it concerns child-directed learning in the classroom (explored in this study as child-initiated activities, open-ended questions, and environmental support of pretend play),

research indicates that Eastern cultures differ from Western cultures in both their value of child-directed learning and the ways in which they implement it in early childhood education. The appropriateness of child-directed instruction is questioned by many Eastern cultures, potentially because of the difficulty of reconciling it with Asian values of respecting authority and teachers as didactic instructors (and obedient students as passive learners). The following section synthesizes research comparing these differing views.

**Western Views of Classroom Activities in Early Childhood Education.** Western cultures tend to value independent thinking, taking initiative, asking questions, and self-expressive assertiveness (Clarke-Stewart, Lee, Allhusen, Kim & McDowell, 2006). Due to this, in the early childhood classroom, the teacher is often seen as an unobtrusive scaffolder (Grieshaber, 2016) and a facilitator who arranges the environment to allow for effective self-exploration and learning (Kwon, 2003).

Research supports the pervading Western cultural beliefs around children guiding their own play and learning. Western parents believe play is beneficial for cognitive development and creative thinking, and they engage in pretend play with their children from their first years (Farver, Kim, & Lee, 1995; Fusaro & Smith, 2018; Parmar, Harkness, & Super, 2004; Roopnarine & Davidson, 2015; Wu, Faas, & Geiger, 2018). In Wu and colleagues' (2018) study examining teachers' and parents' conceptions of learning through play in a Western context (Germany) and an East Asian context (Hong Kong), the German parents described highly teacher-directed activities as negative (inappropriate), and they believed that children learned less from didactic approaches than through self-initiative.

**East Asian Views of Classroom Activities in Early Childhood Education.** A more adult-directed, or didactic, approach to education is typically seen in the East. East Asian

cultures tend to value the teacher as expert and expect obedience and compliance on the part of the students (Peng, 2017). This is due, at least in part, to the heavy influence of Confucian values, which include emphasis on academics, obedience, and respect (Cheung, 2017; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006; Grieshaber, 2016; Kwang & Smith, 2004; Peng, 2017). As Grieshaber notes, “Confucian ideas suggest that play can disturb children’s learning and create an obstacle to academic achievement” (2016, p. 12). Similarly, Kwang and Smith note that the Confucian tradition views the teacher as a moral exemplar, to be honored through “meekness and obedience” (2004, p. 320). In the home, these Confucian values are also at work, as caregivers use a didactic approach to teach proper conduct through structured “play” activities (Haight, Wang, Fung, Williams, & Mintz, 1999). These didactic approaches also mean more worksheets, rote memory, group drilling, and less peer interaction (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006; Grieshaber, 2016). In contrast to the German preschools, in Hong Kong, even when play is used for learning, it is highly structured. For example, play in the Hong Kong setting is generally highly supervised, with the expectation that all children will be involved. Its tightly structured setup resembled a game with rules rather than free, open play (Wu et al., 2018).

Additional studies have compared preschools in Western and East Asian contexts. A study by Clarke-Stewart et al. (2006) compared American & Korean preschool teachers and found that Korean teachers held to more traditional attitudes about education and were less likely than American teachers to converse and play alongside children. They tended to be more detached and used memorization and ‘skills and drills’ approaches to education. As a result, U.S. children spent “20 times as much time playing with a teacher as did children in Korea” (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006, p. 437). Perhaps unsurprisingly, American teachers reported closer relationships with their students and were observed to be more attached and less distant in their

interactions (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006). Clarke-Stewart et al. (2006) concluded from their study that the American teachers had higher levels of involvement in children's classroom activity, and, therefore, exhibited a more child-centered approach.

Kwon (2003) compared preschool education in London, England and Seoul, Korea. He found that 39.3% of Korean teachers believe play time and work time should be separate (compared to 16.5% of English educators). Korean teachers supported worksheets in much higher numbers as well. Kwon explains that English preschool education "emphasizes the individuality and autonomy of young children" (2003, p. 489). In contrast, Korean preschool education, impacted significantly by Confucianism, "reflects traditional educational values such as the authority of the teacher, the teacher's strong control, the emphasis on whole-group activities and Korean parents' enthusiasm about the children's early start on formal learning" (Kwon, 2003, p. 489).

### **Adult-Guided Activities: A Culturally Responsive Alternative**

Child-initiated activities are positively associated with socioemotional skills, creative thinking, ability to problem-solve, and other positive aspects of early childhood development (Connolly & Doyle, 1984; Galyer & Evans, 2006; Goldstein & Russ, 2000; Marcelo & Yates, 2014; Ramani, 2012). In addition, there are common pedagogical themes in child-directed classrooms, including the amount of time spent in child-initiated activities, and how supportive the environment is of inquiry and pretend play (Cremin et al., 2006; Craft et al., 2012; Russ & Wallace, 2013). There has been a movement in East Asia for early childhood education mandates to involve more child-directed learning. However, it may be difficult to change

pedagogy just by changing mandates. Thus, a more intentional approach may be required to make progress toward the development of child-directed classrooms in East Asia.

One possible approach to more culturally appropriate child-directed learning in an East Asian context may be to use more adult-*guided* activity (a bridge between fully adult-initiated activities and children having free reign of their activities and play). Considering the cultural and contextual implications of creative thinking in the Asian classroom, a teacher-guided approach may be a better fit than a fully child-initiated style. Cheung found that children were more creative when a teacher was involved, to some degree. When left entirely to their own initiative, children “quickly ran out of ideas and their thinking became repetitive” (2018, p. 518). In the teacher-guided approach, by contrast, children showed higher levels of involvement, enjoyment, and persistence. For example, one of the Chinese teachers in Cheung’s earlier study used a balanced approach to teacher-directed and child-directed activity. Cheung found that, using teacher-guided activities, children were able to “try out their ideas with a variety of thought-provoking materials before coming up with a child-led creative solution” (2017, p. 83). Cheung (2017) observed that the children in this classroom gained confidence in expressing creative ideas and solutions, and that they were more successful in their problem-solving.

In another study, Ramani (2012) had 76 preschoolers from multiple early childhood education centers listen to a story that established a problem that could be solved by building a certain type of structure. The children were then guided by the adults to work on a joint block-building activity to solve the problem (working in groups of two). The activity was set up by the adult using a certain carpet square, specific blocks, and five specific characteristics their house should have (four walls, tall walls, rooms, door, strong outside) that related to the story they had read. However, after this initial adult guidance and some structured rules, one group of dyads had

a flexible, child-initiated building task (which allowed for pretend play) where they worked with classmates. They were told to pretend they were the children in the story and build the house using the above characteristics how they wanted. The other group of dyads was given the same task; however, the adult oversaw the task the entire time and gave specific instructions for what the final building should look like and no pretend play was encouraged. The children who participated in the adult-guided building task built more complex structures and engaged in more positive communication and collaboration with their peers.

From this study, one can see how some initial adult guidance can allow for children to explore creatively and collaboratively with peers with a bit more support than if it was completely unstructured. The children in the study were given some basic rules and instructions and told to solve the problem from the story—it was not a completely child-initiated time of block play. However, when the teacher stood back and let them pretend and collaborate together creatively, they were able to achieve more than the group that had been completely adult-led. For young children who arrive in a classroom with cultural expectations that they are to listen and obey their teacher and follow their directions (not just treat the classroom as a free-for-all play environment), adult-guided activities like this one may help unlock their creative abilities and critical thinking better than completely unstructured playtime.

Due to the findings from this research on adult-guided activities being potentially beneficial in an East Asian context, this study also assessed how much time was spent in this type of activity, compared to fully child-initiated or adult-initiated activity, to gain information on if it is seen in Philippine preschools-and to what degree.

## **East Asia's Changing Mandates in Early Childhood Education**

Due to the suggested value of child-directed learning, mandated changes to pedagogy in East Asian countries have become widespread. Since the early 2000s, play-based curriculum is now the prevailing preschool education model in most East Asian nations—at least on paper (Cheung, 2018; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006; Kwon, 2003; Peng, 2017). In 2000, the Education Bureau of Hong Kong imposed a massive curriculum reform which placed high emphasis on creativity (Cheung, 2018; Grieshaber, 2016). In 2001, mainland China also initiated significant curriculum reform, trying to overhaul traditional pedagogy in favor of play-based, child-centered curriculum at the Kindergarten level and the desire to protect children's right to play (Grieshaber, 2016; Peng, 2017). In Korea, the government has worked to reduce the academic emphasis and uniformity in favor of a western-style, child-centered approach (Kwon, 2003). Korea's national kindergarten curriculum is thus now child-centered and play-oriented (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006; Grieshaber, 2016). Singapore's Ministry of Education released guidelines in 2012 for children learning through play (Grieshaber, 2016). Japan's Ministry of Education sees play as a child's voluntary activity and sees play-centered instruction as important to kindergarten education (Grieshaber, 2016).

However, the effect of these mandates has often been underwhelming. Research by Chafi and Elkhouzai (2017), who study culture's impact on pedagogy, found that while mandates may alter some classroom dynamics, they are generally ineffective in initiating deep and meaningful change. As noted above, East Asian cultures value group interest, discipline, and very high respect and obedience towards teachers. Clarke-Stewart and colleagues note that "These values are clearly at odds with Western views that emphasize the rights of individuals—including children—to freely choose their own goals and express their own feelings" (2006, p. 429).

## **Culture Speaks Louder Than Mandates.**

In light of the deep cultural roots of adult-directed educational approaches in East Asia, it is not surprising that research demonstrates that pedagogies and curriculum in East Asia are resistant to child-initiated play (Cheung, 2018; Grieshaber, 2016). Though teachers may understand mandates and even see the value of creativity-fostering activities, they often struggle to actually implement them (Cheung, 2018; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006; Kwon, 2003).

In Kwang and Smith's (2004) research, Asian teachers listed desirable student characteristics—Responsible, sincere, reliable, dependable, good-natured, and tolerant tended to be high on the list. It is interesting to note that these descriptive words were associated with the lowest levels of creativity in a previous study completed by Kwang and Smith. Kwang and Smith (2004) go on to point out traits that are associated with creative students—basic lack of courtesy, a stubborn refusal to take “no” for an answer, determined, independent, individualistic, impulsive, and risk-taking—are seen by Asian teachers as undesirable (Kwang & Smith, 2004). Therefore, their study dealt with what they believed to be the “paradox” of promoting creativity in an Asian classroom. Teachers understand the value of creative and critical thinking, but they also find this type of classroom behavior undesirable and deviant.

The effect of culture is evident even in communities of immigrants, where parent expectations are likely to shape the design of classrooms and curricula. In Farver and colleagues' study (1995), researchers compared European American preschools in a small city in America (where teachers in the sample were all white and middle class) and a Korean-American preschool in a Koreatown section of a large city in west coast America. Unlike the play-focused European American preschools in the study, the Korean-American preschool was highly structured and organized the class and curriculum to encourage academic skills and passive



involvement in learning. Even though the Korean-American teachers had been born and raised in the United States and did their education at American colleges, the academic nature of the preschool curriculum and the philosophies of the teachers seemed to reflect more the Korean values of their parents (and possibly themselves as well) (Farver et al., 1995). This research study argued that family cultural values influence pedagogy in complex ways, over and above the practices taught by a Western college education. Studies like this may also point to why education and training in pedagogical practices that do not align with one's cultural beliefs may be difficult for students to then implement when they become teachers themselves. This is discussed in director interviews in the current study.

It is not only the teacher's culture that affects the implementation of classroom mandates, but the children's as well. Teachers and students both bring invisible, shared meaning into the classroom and this greatly impacts how learning takes place (Chafi & Elkhousai, 2017). For example, some studies have shown that Korean parents are more concerned than US parents with spoiling their children by giving them too much attention, and therefore they engage in much less conversation than American adults do with their children (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006; Tudge et al., 1999). Clarke-Stewart and colleagues hypothesize that this may contribute to why in their study (and others) it has been observed that Korean preschoolers are less prone than American students to use inquiry in the classroom as a means of creative thinking, because they are less likely to seek out teachers to converse with (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006).

From birth, culture begins to shape thinking and behavior. Developmental theories, such as Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, discuss how a child's development cannot be separated from the social and cultural context in which a child is raised, and point out how that culture shapes even the process and content of children's thoughts. Additionally, Albert

Bandura's social learning theory defined the concept of modeling—how children learn to think and view the world through observing and imitating others. This is a process that begins in infancy with their parents (Bandura, 1978; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). Therefore, children step into the classroom, even at the age of three or four, already primed by their home culture to respond to adults in specific ways and seek out specific types of learning experiences. One can begin to connect the dots and see that if an educational mandate does not align with either the teacher or the child's cultural values and previous learning experiences, it may be difficult to adopt.

### **The Current Study**

Cheung's (2017) study unearthed an important tension between structure and freedom in creative thinking within an Asian context. He points out that further studies need to be conducted to gain understanding about current universal trends and how they interact with the variations in different cultures when examining creative pedagogy. Ultimately, this balance is likely to be different across cultures. Much of the existing research considers the tension between East Asian cultures and pedagogy focused on fostering creativity; however, research is lacking with respect to the Philippines. The current study addresses some of these gaps by examining child-initiated activities, open-ended questions, and environmental support of pretend play within Southeast Asia, specifically the Philippines, which shares many cultural values with its East Asian neighbors. This study explored child-initiated, adult-initiated, and adult-guided activities in two types of Philippine preschools. In addition, the study assessed how often teachers pose open-ended questions to the children, and it measured the classroom environments' support of pretend play. Examining these two additional areas (questions and environmental support) allowed for

deeper comparisons across the different types of preschools (traditional and progressive/child-centered). Along with gathering data in these three ways, the study takes an in-depth look at interviews conducted with directors at the five progressive/child-centered preschools, to see how their perceptions of important terms relating to child-directed learning (holistic, experiential, child-centered) impact their philosophy of education and the way they conduct their programs. These interviews helped create a more cohesive picture of the data collected in the classrooms so that more knowledge could be gained about how cultural beliefs and values may shape early childhood education.

Thus, the proposed study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How much time do the schools devote to child-initiated activity, adult-initiated activity, and adult-guided activity?
2. How many open-ended questions are posed by the lead teacher in the two types of preschool?
3. How supportive are the different classroom environments of pretend play?
4. In progressive/child-centered preschools, how do directors' perceptions of important terms relating to child-directed learning (holistic, experiential, child-centered) impact their philosophy of education and the way they conduct their programs?

For research question one, my hypothesis, in light of current research in other Asian countries, was that progressive preschools look similar to their traditional preschool counterparts in regard to amount of time spent in adult-initiated activities and child-initiated activities, but differ in the time allotted for adult-guided activities (with more adult-guided activities taking place in the progressive/child-centered preschools). For research question two, I hypothesized that teachers in both traditional and progressive preschools in the Philippines would ask few open-ended questions, since encouraging creative thinking and individualism is not as culturally valued as learning from the teacher who is the “expert” and research seems to indicate that many

Asian cultures value didactic, adult-led teaching. If a difference was observed, I hypothesized that the progressive/child-centered preschools may ask more open-ended questions than the traditional preschools. For research question three, I hypothesized that the progressive preschools in the Philippines would have environments that are more supportive of pretend play than traditional preschools. In regards to the fourth research question, I hypothesized that the cultural beliefs and values of the directors would impact the lens through which they viewed child-directed learning.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The current study examined two different types of preschools in the Philippines (traditional and progressive/child-centered) to record the amount of time the lead teacher designated for children to engage in different types of activities (child-initiated, adult-initiated, or adult-guided), how often the lead teacher asked open-ended questions, and how well the environment supported pretend play, in order to gain insight into the influences of culture and practices on the preschool classroom. Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board for this study, IRB-FY2020-438, on January 20, 2020, and the letter of approval appears in Appendix A.

This study was a collective case study using holistic analysis. It examined multiple bounded systems (cases) through detailed data collection with multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2007). The data were collected from video recorded classroom observations and an environmental checklist. In addition, director interviews were conducted at the progressive/child-centered preschools to gain additional insight into how the director's perceptions of important terms relating to child-directed learning (holistic, experiential, child-centered) impact their philosophy of education and the way they conduct their programs.

### **Participants**

One traditional preschool and five progressive/child-centered preschools from small cities on the outskirts of Manila, Philippines participated in the study. From each school, one preschool lead teacher was selected to have their classroom observed. The researcher collaborated with the schools to choose a lead teacher who was willing to participate. The

preschool classrooms consisted of children between the ages of 36 months and 60 months. In the Philippines, the terms *daycare* and *junior kindergarten* are also used to describe preschool classrooms that cater to this age group.

The preschools were chosen using purposive sampling. The researcher deliberately selected the sample using her experience and knowledge of the groups to be sampled based on their philosophies, their cost, and research and discussion with nationals about the differences between progressive/child-centered and traditional preschool. The criteria for each type of preschool was as follows:

- 1) *Traditional Preschool*: a locally run and operated preschool whose core values are academic in nature and does not use a progressive or child-centered curriculum or method. Preschools in this category are affordable to the working class, with tuition less than 25,000 pesos (\$500) per year.
- 2) *Progressive/Child-Centered Preschool*: a locally run and operated preschool who describe their approach as *child-centered* OR *play-based* AND *progressive*. These descriptions can be seen on their websites, as well as in their school literature. These preschools have more resources than the traditional preschools and have a tuition that is above 45,000 (\$900) per year.

Originally, the researcher had intended to examine 3-5 traditional and 3-5 progressive preschool settings. However, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic and the abrupt closing of all educational institutions in March of 2020 (with a Philippine government mandate that there would be no return to face-to-face school for the following 2020-2021 school year), the researcher chose to examine more closely the schools from which data had already been gathered (1 traditional preschool and 5 progressive preschools). This was partly a necessity due to time constraints, and partly due to the reality that even after preschools resume face-to-face

instruction, classroom activities and free play could be significantly impacted by post-pandemic restrictions and would not be valid in comparison to research collected prior to the pandemic.

## **Procedure**

Before beginning the research study, a small pilot study was conducted at an international school (both a preschool and a kindergarten classroom) to make sure observations and data collection could be done with ease. In identifying an international school, the research looked for those which are accredited by an international council and which promote international education in an international environment, using a Western curriculum. Prior to COVID-19, international preschools were expected sites of study; however, the current study focuses on only traditional and progressive preschools. The pilot study assessed if recording the type of activity (child-initiated, adult-initiated, and adult-guided), and the number of open-ended questions posed by the lead teacher were able to be recorded and coded in the manner proposed by the study. The Pretend Play Environmental Checklist (described in more detail below) was also piloted in two classrooms, to make sure it was reliable and valid.

The researcher chose to pilot the pretend play environmental checklist at a traditional international preschool and kindergarten for two reasons. First, it allowed the researcher to implement the checklist to assess for face validity. Second, the researcher chose a traditional setting (not a progressive school that claims to be “play based” or “progressive”) as a baseline to see if measurable differences could be obtained across different types of schools. Interestingly, the preschool environment scored higher on supporting pretend play than any of the local

preschools (traditional or progressive), which may point to some of the cultural differences in preschool education.

The researcher found schools for each category through online searches, reading the overview and core values of each preschool and discussion with the co-researcher. The co-researcher is a Filipina college professor with extensive knowledge about the local school system and connections at many area schools. The researcher aimed to keep the local preschools (traditional and progressive/child-centered) in the smallest radius possible to use a similar demographic and environment. The researcher further investigated the schools to see if they met the criteria defined above through contacting the director and speaking on the phone or via email. The researcher then set up a meeting with the preschool director to share the proposed project and ask for permission to observe and video record a teacher. The co-researcher accompanied the researcher to these initial meetings, and during these meetings, after informed consent procedures, the researcher recorded additional information from the director about their philosophy of education and why they approach early childhood education in this way (see Appendix B; additional probing questions were asked to best understand directors' responses). These director interviews were used as part of the case study data, and they also added to the above descriptions of the two types of preschools to provide more detail regarding how these programs are enacted in the area. The researcher also ascertained, from discussion with the directors, when would be the most ideal time for the two-hour observation to take place.

Preschools in the Philippines are half-day programs, with the majority being 2.5 to 3 hours long and no meals served (just a snack, in some programs). The researcher or co-researcher discussed with the director when would be the best time to come to see the most variety of activity. For example, if the last twenty minutes of a 2.5-hour preschool day are spent



with the children lined up and waiting for parents to pick up, then the observation would be scheduled for the start of the day, so as not have skewed data. The researcher's goal was to make a plan with the director to come at a time when the classroom was active and moving through the different main aspects of their day (avoiding times like pickup and drop-off), and also to choose times that would show the most similar types of activity across the different preschools.

The researcher also discussed with the specific lead teacher to set up a time when the observation could take place and obtained informed consent from the teacher. At this meeting, the researcher also provided the teacher with parent opt-out forms (see Appendix C), which were provided in case any parents did not want their child to be video recorded. As the study focused on teacher behaviors and the classroom environment, no data was collected on children; thus, only a parent-opt out form for video was required. Parents had one week to return these forms. The parent opt-out forms were collected when the researcher returned to the site for the observation time. No parents at any of the programs chose to have their child opt out.

Classroom data were collected in the form of observations and a pretend play environmental checklist. Upon entering the classroom on the scheduled observation date, the researcher and co-researcher set up a video camera and observed the actions of the specified lead teacher for the duration of the observation time (2 hours).

The researcher reviewed the video footage and any notes taken during the observation time to record how much time was spent in child-initiated, adult-initiated, or adult-guided activity. The researcher recorded minutes spent in each activity. For example, if the teacher was standing back and observing the class while they were engaged in free play from 9:47-10:15, and then she called them to the rug for an instructional time, this was coded as 28 minutes of child-initiated activity.

In addition to coding minutes spent in child-initiated, adult-initiated, or adult-guided activities, the researcher examined two additional variables. First, the number of open-ended questions the teacher asked children during the duration of the observation period. Second, the environment was assessed for how well it facilitates pretend play using an environmental checklist developed by the researcher.

## Measures

Videotaped observations were used to record *naturally occurring* classroom activity—coding was focused on the lead teacher’s activity/behavior, using the coding processes described below.

**Child-Initiated, Adult-Initiated, and Adult-Guided Activities (Activity Type).** *Child-initiated activities* are when a child is guiding their own play/activity. *Adult-initiated activities* are when the teacher is “in charge.” These are the times in which it is expected that the children are listening to the teacher as the “expert,” such as when the teacher is leading a gathering, instructional time, explaining an activity/assignment, or students are working on assignments/activities that they are required to do. For a switch from child-initiated to adult-initiated activity, the teacher must be controlling the activity for a minimum of three minutes (for example, if children are playing fireman and the teacher comes in and facilitates play – adding some props and suggesting ideas – but then moves to “standing back,” this will continue to be coded as child-initiated play).

*Adult-guided activities* are when the children are supported by the adult-directed activities to try out their ideas with a variety of thought-provoking materials before coming up with a child-led creative solution or product. It includes a time of adult-directed instruction and

then a time for children to be free to create or explore. For an adult-guided activity, the time was coded from when the teacher explains the activity to the children through the duration of the activity. For example, the teacher is introducing some new collage materials, she begins the instruction at 8:32. She makes a sample collage and shows it to the kids, then sets them up at the table to use the collage materials how they would like; but she joins them and begins making a second collage herself, offering ideas to the children for how to affix the different materials. Some children are allowed to move on to free play, but the teacher remains at the table exploring with a handful of kids. At 9:08 they begin cleaning up. This was coded as 36 minutes of adult-guided activity before switching to adult-initiated (clean-up time).

These observations took place over a two-hour period of time. They were video recorded for more reliable coding. In addition, the co-researcher acted as a reliability coder, accompanying the researcher to 3 of the 4 classrooms observed to ensure the coding methods were reliable. The reliability coder was a Filipina college professor who could also help the researcher if there were any linguistic problems. Reliability was assessed using consensus coding, with the researcher and coresearcher comparing minutes they coded in different activities (child-initiated, adult-initiated, and adult-guided), and then discussing any discrepancies in greater detail. The researcher and coresearcher came to 100% consensus on time spent in activities.

**Open-Ended Questions.** Open-ended questions are defined as those that require children to compose a thoughtful answer and cannot be answered with a one-word answer (“yes” or “no,” or one correct answer, such as “spiders” in answer to the question, “What animal spins a web?”). Such questions encourage children to participate in possibility thinking and divergent thinking. For example, an open-ended question may be phrased along the lines of, “What do you think would happen if we....” or “How do you think the story would have ended if \_\_\_\_ had happened

instead?” Such questions stand in contrast to questions that have a simple answer, such as, “Where did the fish go when it swam over the waterfall?”

The frequency of open-ended questions was tallied during the observations. In addition, the above-mentioned reliability coder accompanied the researcher to 3 of the 4 observed classrooms and tallied the number of open-ended questions, to ensure the coding methods were reliable. At two of the classrooms, coders agreed 100% of the time. At one classroom there was discrepancy on the number of open-ended questions because several questions were posed that required more than a yes/no answer. The researcher and coresearcher discussed this and came to a consensus that they were not open-ended questions based on the study’s definition. This is explained in more depth (with the specific questions included) in the *Results* Section.

**Environmental Support of Pretend Play.** Pretend play is when children use costumes, props, or toys to take on different roles, act out something, or use their imagination to pretend objects are something else entirely. Often pretend play involves multiple children taking on imaginary roles together, or assigning them to one another: “You be mommy, I’ll be the kitty, this is our house.” It could also be children pretending they are firemen, playing house, or imagining that long blocks are fisherman poles.

Because the purpose of the current study was to examine how much each preschool classroom facilitates child-directed learning, the environments were assessed using a checklist to see how well they supported pretend play (see Appendix D). The Pretend Play Environmental Checklist was developed by the researcher and piloted in two classrooms prior to the observations. It is a 20-point scale, made up of 10 items, looking specifically at the environment to see what materials are available to support pretend play (and if there is a designated dramatic play area to encourage this type of play). It is atypical for preschool classrooms in the

Philippines to have a designated dramatic play area; however, classrooms may have pretend play props and dolls available on shelves. This study sought to record this nuance by noting the different materials available in the environment, even if they are not in a specific area.

The Pretend Play Environmental Checklist (PPEC) assessed the environment to see what different pretend play props and materials were available for the children—with some focus specifically on dolls and kitchen items. These items are often mentioned in literature as important aspects of an early childhood classroom for encouraging pretend play, in part because much of children's play involves imitating what they see in their day-to-day lives, (e.g., imitating parent roles like caring for children and cooking or going to restaurants). Points were awarded for each question if the materials were present for use, but the items themselves were not assessed for quality.

During the two-hour observation period, both the researcher and coresearcher (at 3 of the 4 preschools) took notes on the environmental checklist, recording how facilitative the environment was of pretend play. When the two-hour observation period was complete, the researcher walked around the classroom to make sure nothing was missed from the checklist and also did a video sweep of the classroom. Each preschool was awarded a score from 0-20 based on how supportive their environment was of pretend play. The researcher and co-researcher included more detailed notes on the checklists for reference during data analysis. Consensus coding was used and the researcher and coresearcher agreed 100% of the time at two of the preschools. At one school there was 90% reliability, with discrepancy on whether play props were available. After discussion, it was agreed upon they were not available based on the definition of play in the study. This is explained in greater detail in the *Discussion* section under the subheading *Different Perspectives on Terminology Relating to Child-Directed Learning*.

## **Analysis**

The proposed study was a collective case study using holistic analysis. It examined multiple bounded systems (cases) through detailed data collection with multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2007). The system that was analyzed was the preschool system in the Philippines, and the multiple cases consisted of several progressive/child-centered preschool classrooms and one traditional preschool classroom. Multiple cases were used to establish a possible range of generality for Philippine preschool environments and beliefs about child-directed learning, as well as to provide more explanatory power for why those environments may or may not support child-directed learning—and to what capacity. The data was collected on two levels: director interviews and classroom data (surveys, observations, anecdotal notes, and an environmental checklist).

The research is presented through heuristic multiple case studies to give readers insight into the nature of child-directed learning in the Philippine preschool classroom. In particular, it aims to demonstrate how child-directed environments may differ in traditional and progressive classrooms, and the impact of Filipino culture on beliefs about child-directed learning. Creswell (2007) points out that there is no standard structure for presenting data from case study research, partly because the intent of the study (to generate theory, to give detailed descriptions of cases, or to analyze/compare different cases) will have an impact on the way the data is presented and discussed. This study in particular aimed to both give detailed descriptions of the different cases and to present data in a way that it can be analyzed and compared across cases.

The setup of the results section uses an overall structural setup that Creswell (2007) recommends case studies use to allow for a clear flow of ideas. First, each case study (preschool) opens with a vignette to allow the reader to get a feel for the school (Creswell, 2007). Next, there

is an extensive narrative description of the two-hour observation that took place at each school. This narrative strives to be unbiased and avoid any speculation, but it aims to be presented in exactly the manner the reader would experience if they were the one conducting the observation (Creswell, 2007). Finally, each case study (preschool) has a section dedicated to the variables found in the research questions: time spent in child-initiated, adult-initiated, and adult-guided activity, open-ended questions, and scoring on the Pretend Play Environmental Checklist (how supportive the environment is of pretend play). These sections are able to present quantitative data that can more easily be compared across the multiple cases. This allows the reader to have a more objective look at each classroom in how it compares to the others, as well as providing measurable data that could be used in comparisons to other preschool environments.

After each preschool is described in the same manner outlined above, there is an additional section on the progressive/child-centered preschools' director interviews. This data is presented in a discussion format, synthesizing the information gained at the different schools and using quotations where valuable to help the reader have an accurate picture of these interviews. Two themes that emerged during these interviews are discussed in more detail. These interviews contribute to the discussion of child-directed learning in a Philippine preschool context.

The Results section strives to present the multiple case studies as outlined above, and then the Discussion section continues to implement a style recommended by Creswell (2007). It presents a few key issues that arose from the results, helping the reader understand the complexity of the case studies – and builds on this complexity through added references to others' research and referring back to research discussed in the above literature review.

## **RESULTS**

The following results section includes descriptions of the observations that took place at each of the preschools visited (one traditional and three progressive), followed by the time spent in adult-initiated, adult-guided, and child-initiated time, the number of open-ended questions posed by the teachers, and scores from the Pretend Play Environmental Checklist. Table 1 compares the quantitative data of each school on time spent in each type of activity and number of open-ended questions asked. Additionally, Table 2 shows a more in-depth view of the scores of each preschool on the PPEC, including the two classrooms where it was piloted.

Following this, results report information gleaned from the director interviews that took place at the progressive schools, along with two additional progressive preschools (for a total of five director interviews) where observations had to be cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and sudden school closures.

### **Traditional Preschool**

At first glance, First Steps Preschool and Elementary looks like a commercial building or warehouse set along a crowded street in a small city on the outskirts of Manila. However, once the researchers arrive, they notice banners hanging along the building declaring the vision of the school and its accolades. One states, “Home of the Math and Science Champions.” One shares the school’s vision: “A nurturing school community enabling individuals to become holistic, integrated, and striving for desirable change in society.” The researchers arrived early to get set up for the two-hour observation. At 11:20, when they walked in the classroom, 13 children were sitting at plastic tables in two rows. They continued to sit like this, occasionally whispering to



each other or jostling one another until reprimanded by a teacher. 22 minutes later, at 11:42, the lead teacher declared one child absent and began the opening activities. The researcher asked the teacher if this was a typical start to the morning. She said yes and lamented that the children could be naughty, talking to each other and moving around some, instead of sitting quietly and patiently.

### **Observation/Time Spent in Child-initiated, Adult-initiated, and Adult-guided**

**Activities.** First Steps was contacted for this study because of its traditional approach to education. For this study this was defined as a program stating core values that are academic in nature and indicating they do not use a progressive or child-centered curriculum or method. Traditional preschools are accessible to the working class and cost less than 25,000 pesos (\$500) per year. Though First Steps was not a religiously affiliated school, the morning activities include singing their prayer-leader song and a group prayer, followed by the national anthem, pledge of allegiance, and school anthem. After completing these activities, the children sang along to some songs played over a speaker while doing actions and dancing in place. This ended at 11:58, when the teacher turned on a video teaching the children about the national currency, the peso.

The educational video showed pieces of paper money and coins on the screen while a female voiceover explained how much each was worth. The video was in English but would repeat each denomination in Tagalog as well as English. When the largest bill was shown (1000 pesos, equivalent of about 20 dollars), a gasp went through the classroom and several children yelled out, "One Thousand!" The video ended at 12:02, and for the next 48 minutes there was a lesson about money. The teacher began by asking some closed questions about the video. The children then were shown colored pieces of paper (that matched the colors of the peso bills) and

asked the color names. After this, the teacher passed out envelopes to each child that had large pieces of play money in them. There was one of each bill: 20 peso (orange), 50 peso (red), 100 peso (purple), 200 peso (green), 500 peso (yellow), and 1000 peso (blue). The children showed collective excitement as they looked at their bills and organized them according to the order on the board. The teacher then asked them to raise the correct bill when she said the denomination. After this activity, colored boxes were set out. An orange one labeled “Teacher School Supplies,” a red one labeled “Abandoned Senior Citizens,” a blue one labeled “Fighting the Cancer,” a green one labeled “Infected by the Corona Virus,” a yellow one labeled “Victims of Calamity,” and a blue one labeled “Taal Volcano Victims.” The children were asked to put their bills in order by their color (amount) so that when they were called on, they could come up and drop them into the appropriate box. The teacher then said that they would help other people by giving them the money, and she explained each box and what the money could buy them. The kids came up one by one, to put their money through the slot in the top of the box. It took 12 minutes for each kid to get a turn to put their money in the slot, while the other children waited at their tables.

When this activity ended, the children were handed a “working mat” (a large sheet with their name written on the top) and a math worksheet to place atop it. The teacher then walked the kids through the sheet, giving them the answers to each question about money. The researcher was informed that each day of the week focused on a different curriculum area (math, Filipino, science, language, and reading). The children learned the material needed for their exams.

At 12:57, they lined up to wash hands, then got their snack from their bags and had snack time until the end of the school day (1:30). The kids ate snack at their desks and too much talking was discouraged.

During the two-hour observation period, 120 minutes was spent in teacher-initiated activity, 0 minutes in teacher-guided, and 0 minutes in child-initiated.

**Open-Ended Questions.** At First Steps, zero open-ended questions asked by the teacher were recorded. During the 48-minute lesson on money, following the instructional video, several closed questions were asked. In addition, the teacher would often follow up with the answer to the question without pausing for the children to answer it themselves. For example, immediately following the video, the teacher said, “What is the video all about? It’s all about money. Very good!” While children yelled out “money!” at various points. The teacher also asked the children what color each bill was as she held it up and how much each bill was worth. For example, “How much is the green money?” “How much is the yellow money?” She would often answer these herself immediately after asking.

After the lesson on money where the children looked at their play money, she prepared for them to place it into the color coordinated “donation” boxes. She began this activity by saying, “We will use the money to help other people. Do you want to help other people?” The children all yelled, “Yes!” She then asked, “Are you excited?” And they all yelled yes again. After the children completed the activity dropping their money into the donation boxes, the teacher talked about how if you don’t have food, clothes, or money to help others you can help them by praying for them. She stated this as a question, but answered it herself, rather than having the children come up with their own reasons for ways they could help others if they don’t have money.

She restated that they were little and had no money to give so they should pray, “Because our Lord is the only hero who can solve our problems.” This began a mini lesson on the importance of prayer. (Religion is discussed more in depth in the discussion section).

**Pretend Play Environmental Checklist.** On the *Pretend Play Environmental Checklist (PPEC)* the classroom scored a 0/20. There were no toys or play materials in the classroom. There was no outdoor time. The researcher observed that there was a small basketball court/play area outside, but it was being used for parking for the school's service vans. The teacher informed the researcher that on special occasions the children are sometimes walked to a nearby private neighborhood's playground to play.

First Steps tuition was at the high end for traditional preschools (25,000 pesos + 5000 pesos for uniforms and materials), and it is well-known in the community, having been in operation for over 20 years and won many awards for academics. It was also unique in its low teacher:child ratio (2:14 in the preschool classroom). Due to these factors, the researchers initially hypothesized this school may be the most child-centered of the traditional schools planned to be observed, since it had more resources at its disposal (tuition money for toys and materials in the classroom), trained teachers, and a good reputation. This made it even more surprising that it had 0 minutes for child-initiated time and scored a 0/20 on the environmental checklist.

### **Progressive Preschools**

**Learning Values Academy.** Twenty-two children are gathered around the teacher for circle time. They are having a lesson about the weather and money. One child is sent to open the classroom door, look outside, and inform his classmates about the weather. The child says that it is sunny, and everyone agrees. The teacher then asks the children if they would eat ice cream on a hot, sunny day. One boy pipes up, "No! Because it would melt!" The teacher tells him that is

wrong and that yes, you would eat ice cream on a hot sunny day. She shows them different bills and asks what is enough for them to go buy ice cream. Later on, while the children are eating snacks from home at the classroom table and watching a learning video, the teacher comes and tells the researchers that one of the questions on the exam the next week is: “Is it okay to eat ice cream on a sunny day, Yes or No?” She then explains to the researchers how the school values giving the children an experiential learning experience. Therefore, she sends the assistant teacher to go buy ice cream at the neighborhood store. He comes back and everyone is given a chocolate ice cream popsicle to eat (including the researchers). While they are eating, the teacher says, “Is it sunny today?” The kids yell, “Yes!” She then responds, “Are we eating ice cream?” And they yell yes again. The teacher concludes aloud that we eat ice cream on a sunny day.

#### Observation/Time Spent in Child-initiated, Adult-initiated, and Adult-guided Activities.

Learning Values Academy was chosen as a progressive school for this study. Tuition is 33,000 pesos and with fees for uniforms, books, etc., the total cost to families is about 40,000 pesos. The program has been around for over 20 years, and it is described in colorful brochures as being progressive, dynamic, and offering creative and experiential activities centered on interaction and process learning. In an interview, further described later, the director described the program as progressive where children learn through experiences. She shared how they are located in a private neighborhood so they can safely take the children out to buy bread and do other things in the community. “They see real plants, real things, not just pictures,” she proudly stated. She was excited to inform the researcher that, “If parents ask what the kids did at school, the kids say we just played. We believe they learn through play because they’re interested.” She said parents are supportive, often describing their program as “different.” When the director introduced the researchers to the classroom teacher, the researchers were informed about the upcoming exams

for which the preschoolers were preparing. Both the director and teacher talked about the holistic learning style but also shared about the academic excellence and instruction that takes place.

On the day of the scheduled observation, school started at 2:00 but the children started getting dropped off around one. The teacher was hurriedly eating in the corner in between the morning and afternoon sessions. There were two dolls, some plastic food, and blocks on the shelves. A few kids got rugs out and set up toys on them to play but most just wandered or ran around the small space. As more children arrived, they began playing in small groups with different materials. Two children built with plastic connector blocks on a small rug they laid out in the middle of the floor. Two girls looked at books they pulled from a basket in one corner. Several children set out plastic food on a table. They were not playing dramatically but working together to cover the table. Once all the food was out, they moved on to another area. Two boys piled wooden blocks into a tower and then pretended two of the blocks were fighters at the top of the tower. The majority of the children were drawing at the long tables that run across two walls of the classroom. All of this child-directed play took place before the official start of the day (and the observation period), and this is discussed more in the *Overall Findings* as relates to child-initiated activities.

Around 1:45, the kids put things away and got out notebooks. No bell was rung or formal instruction given to start notebook work; the children just seemed to begin cleaning up on their own. The researcher asked the teacher how they knew it was time to clean up, and she was informed that the children begin notebook work with little prompting. At 2:00, the school day starts, and the 2-hour formal observation period began. The kids were working in notebooks (as they had been doing for the previous fifteen minutes). There were 22 kids present (2 were absent) and 2 teachers. The children were doing copy writing while the teacher did

individualized instruction. As they finished their copy writing, the children then moved to sit on the floor for circle time.

Circle time was from 2:04-2:55. The teacher discussed the money and weather with the children, as mentioned in the vignette. They sang and danced with the TV and had a water break. They also talked and sang about the planets and continents. They did a group activity where they were handed a clock puzzle piece card and had to find their partner. The teacher then talked about clocks and telling time. They sang a skip counting song and jumped like kangaroos by 10s and 2s. This was all done in place, as the room was quite small and very crowded at this point. At 2:55, the children jump counted one-by-one using numbers on the floor and when they finished their turn, they went and washed hands one at a time.

After washing hands, the children got their snacks from home and watched a learning video. Their assistant teacher also brought them each an ice cream, as mentioned in the vignette. At 3:20, they cleaned up and put away their bags and chairs. They watched learning songs on TV and sang along. Then they lined up to go outside, but while lining up they yelled out the Consonant-Vowel phonics sounds they were learning as the teacher showed them on large cards: gu, fa, ga, go hu, he, etc. At 3:31, they went outside and joined the other two preschool classes (there are about 75 kids total) for physical education (PE). The children were very excited as PE is an activity just for Fridays. They counted by tens aloud and lined up to jump chalk circles and skip count. They also did Chinese jump rope (also known as Jumpsies, yoki or elastic jumping rope) with skip counting. These organized PE games which incorporate academic learning last until the end of the school day (4:00) when parents and service vans pick up children.

During the 2-hour school day, 120 minutes were spent in teacher-initiated activity. 0 minutes were in teacher- guided and 0 minutes were in child-initiated.

Open-Ended Questions. At gathering, 5 questions were asked that required more than a yes/no answer, but under the definition of open-ended questions used for this study, they were still coded as closed questions. The study states that open-ended questions are defined as questions which cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no” but *require children to compose a thoughtful answer*. Previous research has demonstrated that open-ended questions are important for divergent thinking, a key element of creative thinking, which involves being able to come up with a variety of ideas to solve a problem (Russ & Wallace, 2013). The five questions that were asked were led—having “correct answers” and were posed to prepare children for exams, not to encourage creative thinking.

- (1) “What can we do if it’s sunny?”
- (2) “Where can you buy ice cream?”
- (3) “Why don’t we live on Mars? Why isn’t it possible?”
- (4) “Why don’t we have snow in the Philippines?”
- (5) “What are the best foods in this sunny weather?”

The discouragement of creative thinking in response to these questions was explicitly evident when one boy mentioned soup in response to question 5 and the teacher corrected him, saying we would *not* drink hot soup on a hot day. Another child said, “Juice!” And other children chimed in yelling juice. The teacher ignored this response and said, “What would you rather eat on a hot sunny day, hot noodles, or yummy ice cream?” She then told the children she would get them ice cream which they were excited about, but she teased the boy who mentioned eating noodles, “Oh, but I thought you just wanted to eat noodles.”

The teacher also stated the “correct” answers to most of the questions after posing them and letting the children yell out some answers (rather than elaborating on the children’s



answers). After asking, “Where can you buy ice cream?” She stated, “At the supermarket.” “Eat ice cream” was the “correct” answer for what we do if it’s sunny (and also the correct answer for question number 5). For question number 3, when she asked the children why it isn’t possible to live on Mars, one child yelled, “It’s not Earth.” She repeated this and laughed and then moved on to sing the names of planets with the children. For question 4 when she asked the children why they don’t have snow, one child said, “Because it would melt.” and another child said, “Because it’s too hot.” She then said that because it’s a tropical country, we only have summer, we don’t have winter, so we don’t have winter weather. Rather than understanding the critical thinking concepts behind the answers, the teacher was guiding the children toward specific “correct” answers, since they would be on the children’s exams.

Pretend Play Environmental Checklist. On the *PPEC*, Learning Values Academy scored a 6/20. It received points for having dolls/baby care items, play food/kitchen items, and blocks (see Table 2). The materials were easily accessible, on labeled shelves (words and clipart) around the perimeter of the classroom. Children were observed getting small rugs off the shelves and placing them on the floor when playing with the toy blocks, cars, and manipulatives. The director shared that this was modeled on what she had seen in Montessori classrooms. The play food and baby dolls were in a corner where a small table was available to play with them (no rugs needed).

**Hearts Preschool.** The eight children are gathered in a circle around the lead teacher singing a song about their hygiene (this is the way we wash our face, brush our teeth, cut our nails). The children then come up one-by-one to show the teacher their fingernails. As she inspects them, she reminds them how to clean their hands and nails properly, pointing out any dirt they missed.

### Observation/Time Spent in Child-initiated, Adult-initiated, and Adult-guided Activities.

Tucked back off the main city road, Hearts is at the top of a steep hill in a tangle of aged trees. With a rich history in teacher training that dates back about 100 years, Hearts preschool is one of few laboratory preschools in greater Manila. Through their promotional material and in the researchers' interviews with the director, they describe their program as learner-centered, holistic and focused on the learner's creativity and critical thinking skills. They view children as active learners and play as a method of instruction. On the day of the scheduled observation the director excitedly shows the researchers the very large new classroom they are renovating with an observation deck. Alongside it is a library just for the preschool classes where they can go for 40 minutes a week.

The researchers arrived at the classroom a little after 12. At 12:14, the first child arrived. They were dropped off by a parent even though no teacher is present. The child went over to a shelf, got out a puzzle, and brought it to a table. She began working on the puzzle and about five minutes later the two teachers arrived. At 12:25, two other children came in. They brought beads over to the dramatic play area. At 12:30, five of the eight children had arrived and the bell rang to start the day. Children continued to engage in free play throughout the room.

The researchers began their 2-hour observation period at 12:40. The children continued in free play from 12:40-12:58. Kids were observed in the dramatic play area, playing with manipulatives, and doing puzzles. Two student teachers and a lead teacher were roving in the room, sometimes sitting and doing counting or phonics activities with a child who was interested. There were 3 teachers to 8 children (the researchers were told the morning session has 12 children).

At 12:58, the bell rang again, and the children cleaned up and got a drink or used the bathroom if needed. They then began their gathering time at 1:03, with the children sitting in a half-circle on chairs. There is a morning prayer, some songs (day of the week, calendar, and the hygiene song seen in the opening vignette). Then, the majority of the gathering was spent doing phonics instruction. At 1:47, after 44 minutes of gathering, the children lined up and washed hands. They got their snack area prepared, prayed, and then ate.

At 2:10, the children began finishing their snack, putting away dishes, and throwing away their own garbage. They got pillows and lay down on a mat that the teacher had laid out in the corner of the room. At 2:19, the last child was done eating and that child turned off the light for rest time. One teacher lay down with the kids. The lights were out for “rest” for 4 minutes.

At 2:23, the lights were turned on and the teacher sang a wake-up song while the children put their pillows away. 2:26-2:40 was a second gathering of a story time. During the story, no questions were asked, the teacher simply read through the picture book. After she had finished she asked questions about the story. These questions are detailed more in the *open-ended questions* section below.

At 2:40, the children lined up to go outside and this ended the two-hour recorded observation period. However, the researchers were able to stay and see the rest of the school day. The children were so excited that the teacher said they could go to the playground that day (the researchers were told this was only an occasional activity). There were 9 minutes of outside time, then the children came back to the classroom and sat in a circle to practice songs for their graduation (moving up) ceremony. Parents came for pickup at 3:00.

Of the 2-hour observation period, 102 minutes were spent in teacher-initiated activities, 0 minutes in teacher-guided, and 18 minutes in child-initiated.

Open-Ended Questions. After reading a storybook at the second gathering, the lead teacher was observed asking the children some follow-up questions. Initially she asks, “Did you understand the story?” “Yes!” They all yell. She then goes on to ask more closed questions such as “Who are the characters?” “What kind of bird was in the story?” “What happened to the ant?” “Was the hunter successful?” In addition to the close-ended questions there were 2 open-ended questions asked: “Why do you think ant helped bird?” and “What can you do to show your care to other people?” However, the children did not respond to the first question and the teacher moved on. For the second question, she gave an example of helping a friend put their shoes on. Then she led another answer, “You could share your...” One child yelled out “toys,” and another child yelled out “books.” She replied, “Yes, good! Sharing is caring! And another kind of sharing is helping, so helping is caring!” Then she posed the question again to try to encourage more answers. She called on three different children and asked them, but they didn’t answer until she led them with the following questions and statements:

- (1) “You shared your... You shared your what at snack time today?”
- (2) “You helped collect what at rest time? You collected the pillows!”
- (3) “You remind your classmates to what? To fall in line, right?”

Pretend Play Environmental Checklist. On the PPEC, the classroom scored a 14/20. There was a designated dramatic play area in the classroom and many role-play props (cash register, phone) were found in the classroom. There were dolls/baby care items, play food and kitchen items, and a variety of wooden and plastic blocks. Everything was displayed where the children could access it and they could bring items wherever they wanted in the classroom and combine different materials for elaborate play. Even though the children got very little outdoor

time and it was not every day, they still received points for this because when they played outdoors it was unstructured.

**Playroom Preschool.** The small preschool classroom at Playroom is crowded with 14 children and 2 teachers. There is no air-conditioning and the children meander around stand fans as they go to different areas to play. There is a designated dramatic play area set up to look like a train and train station. After gathering, the teacher guides children to different areas to play. The two boys who have been sent to the dramatic play area stand in the center and look around. However, after a few minutes, a teacher comes and joins them. She shows them how to operate the cash register and take turns asking for a ticket and riding the train. But then she leaves them to play on their own. Later, the teacher comes back to the two boys who are wandering aimlessly again, and she gets involved with the play again, “Thanks for the ticket! I’m going to Cubao (a nearby city) and I need to call my mom.” When she leaves for the second time, the two boys seem unsure of what to do now to continue the play. The teacher encourages a third boy to go join them (when he finishes a puzzle). She shows him how to buy a ticket. After a while, a girl joins, and she immediately takes on a role as passenger. She gets in the train and yells, “Bayad po!” to the boy conductor. All the kids start to laugh. [“Bayad, po” is the common phrase you yell to a jeepney driver – the main mode of public transportation in the Philippines – to tell them you have the money to pass forward and pay them.] The teacher comes over and asks where she’s going. She says Cavite (a nearby province). Other boys laugh some more and get into the imaginary game along with her. Now that they are treating the train as a jeepney, it seems to have contextualized the play better for the boys to use their funds of knowledge to speak into their play.

### Observation/Time Spent in Child-initiated, Adult-initiated, and Adult-guided Activities.

Playroom preschool was chosen for the study based on discussion with the director and information gained from promotional material and a school tour. The director described the center as progressive. They are play-based with designated dramatic play areas and space outdoor for doing sensory and art activities (since classrooms are small). The philosophy of the school is that children should be able to direct their own activities and grow in creative thinking.

The day of the observation, after taking a tour with the director and having lunch with some of the staff, the researcher began the observation at the start of the school day, 1:00 PM. The children had gathered outside by the flagpole and were lining up to start their school day. They sang the national anthem, then headed into the classroom. They gathered on individual mats for a gathering using a TV connected to a laptop. They learned about road signs and simple sentences which use the words “a, on, the, in.” Specifically, they worked on the sentence: “The cat is on the mat.”

At 1:25, they finished gathering and went to tables for a simple sentence activity (copying sentences). There were three tables copying sentences, saying sentences, and filling out worksheets. A fourth group was in the dramatic play area drawing the road signs they saw on the wall. As kids finished their table activities, they could play (this begins to happen at 1:33). The teacher got a puzzle out for some children to do and set a clipboard activity at one table. Some other children were in the dramatic play area and at the train table, and a few were coloring. Some more children got smocks for water play and art outside and the assistant teacher went with them. The teacher told the kids where and what to play, so this was recorded as adult-guided activities as defined in this study. Adult-guided activities are when a child is provided materials for an activity by a teacher and supported to then try out their own ideas with the

materials to come up with a child-led creative solution (Cheung, 2017). Adult-guided activities include both time when the teacher is directing and then a time for children to be free to create and explore. The lead teacher, when done at the table with a group, helped two boys play train and cash register. The above vignette takes place at this time.

At 1:51 the teacher told the kids to clean up. Kids finished their activities, the teacher rang the bell, and they washed hands. They then began the second gathering, which involves singing and a lesson on shapes. The gathering lasted 25 minutes, then the children headed to tables for a second set of activities (relating to the lesson they had on shapes). There were two tables with activities and one group was on the floor with shape manipulatives. Four kids were engaged in free play. Kids slowly all went to play and do crafts while the teacher worked with small groups. When the teacher finished up with table groups, she guided another small group doing a clipboard activity.

At 2:52, the bell was rung, and the children began cleaning up before they sat down in the gathering area. One by one, they were called to line up for *merienda* (snack). At 2:57, they went to *merienda* (a healthy snack of rice and vegetables provided by the school). This was the only school we observed where children did not provide their own food. At 3:00, the observation time ended, but the researcher was informed that there would be one more gathering and one more activity then free play, similar to the two cycles before *merienda*. The school day ended at 4:00.

During the observation period, 69 minutes were spent in teacher-initiated activities, 18 minutes were spent in teacher-guided activities (table activities and guided dramatic play) and 33 minutes were spent in child-initiated activity. From 1:33-1:51, the teacher told the children where to play and then she kept coming to the dramatic play area to insert herself into the traveling-play, until she rang the bell for clean up, so this time period was coded all as teacher-

guided. If she had stood back from their play and just observed classroom activity, the researcher would have switched to *child-initiated* coding, but she participated until the play time ended.

At the second gathering time, the teacher worked with kids in small groups (one or two) at the table while the others were completely free to play so this was coded entirely as child-directed, since the teacher was not involved in the play at all.

Open-Ended Questions. At Playroom, there were zero open-ended questions recorded during the observation period. During the gathering times/lessons, there were many closed questions posed on the different topics (road signs, simple sentences, and shapes). During the lesson on road signs, the teacher would point to the left or the right then ask the children which way she was pointing. They would yell out in unison, “Left!” or “Right!”

During the simple sentence activity, the teacher placed a picture of a cat on a mat on the board and wrote the sentence: *The cat is on the mat.* She then stated, “The cat is on the mat. So where is the cat?” The children yelled out “mat!” Then she read the sentence aloud and had the children read it together in unison. She then switched out the picture of the cat for a fat cat and wrote *fat* on the board. She asked the children, “Who is fat?” And they yelled out, “Cat!” And then they read the sentence together: *The cat is fat.*

Since Playroom was the only preschool where adult-guided activity was observed, the researcher was attentive to see if this was a time when open-ended questions would be posed. However, both in the live observation and reviewing the video recording several times, no open-ended questions were noted. When the teacher joined the children in the dramatic play area she did pose some questions that she answered herself, “Where are we going? We’re going to *Cubao!*” And “Does the driver know where *Cubao* is? Yes he does!” Then, while walking around the classroom and facilitating the play time she would ask questions like, “Do you want



to draw or color?” And when kids were coloring transportation pictures, “Where does that go? On the land or in the sea?”

Pretend Play Environmental Checklist. On the PPEC, *Playroom Preschool* scored a 13/20. They had a designated play area that was also used for at least 25% of the observation period. There were many types of role play props displayed in the dramatic play area, and several varieties of blocks (lego, wooden, etc.) located on low shelves around the perimeter of the classroom. The teacher also had different themed boxes that rotate out of the classroom each month. There were no dolls/baby care items or play food, but the director informed the researcher that they wish they had a larger dramatic play area to have a housekeeping area available at all times. Due to this setup, the PPEC did not record that dolls/baby care items and play food were available, since they were not currently accessible and only become available to the children for a month of the school year. The director explained that they rotate different themes (currently transportation) and one month of the year will have baby care and housekeeping. The director explained that they “layer” the dramatic play area throughout the month, putting out basic items the first week, and adding a couple new items each week to the area to make play more elaborate. It is interesting to note that dolls and play food could be used to enhance any theme in the dramatic play area, including transportation, if they were placed on shelves and accessible to the children year-round.

There was a well-outfitted outdoor play space, but the researcher was informed that there was no outdoor time during school because “the day is too short.” Children are allowed to play before and after school on the structures (with parental supervision).

## **Progressive School Director Interviews**

In addition to the three progressive preschools where observations and interviews were conducted before closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher was able to conduct director interviews at two additional centers for a total of five director interviews (all from progressive schools). The schools for which this study only has director interview data include Magic School Bus Preschool and City Preschool. Magic School Bus believes that play is the foundation of learning in early childhood and they “take play very seriously.” The director describes the center as play-based and child-centered. Cooperative play and collaborative problem-solving to promote creative thinking are values shared in their promotional material.

City Preschool is a laboratory preschool connected with a top-tier university in Metro Manila and was established over fifty years ago. The curriculum is interest-based (the teachers study the children for a month and prepare the next month’s activities based on their observations). The director described it as play-based, progressive, and holistic across all curriculum areas. Their promotional material describes the teacher as facilitator and the children’s learning as taking place through play and hands-on experiences.

Two themes emerged from the director interviews at the five different progressive schools: parental expectations and teacher recruitment/training.

**Parental Expectations.** Because the traditional schooling system in the Philippines involves dictated lessons, rote memorization, and teachers as dispensers of knowledge and information, testing begins at the preschool level. The director at Playroom preschool, one of the progressive preschools that did not administer testing, explained to the researcher the pressure they get each year from the Department of Education (DepEd) to have textbooks for their preschool and to be more traditional and focused on academics. She also shared that some

parents get concerned when their children are not performing the rote activities/recitations that other children are in the neighborhood preschools, and that some parents are concerned their 3- and 4- year olds are not reading. However, since the majority of their children are on scholarship, parents are expected to work a small number of hours each week to contribute to the care of the school. This is how the directors involve parents in the education system and allow them to see how it works. The director shared that this involvement helps the parents to see the value in the program.

City Preschool also shared how new families often have high expectations for an academic program, and therefore parental involvement was important to their philosophy of education. In their infant and toddler rooms, parents are often quite involved in the classroom and the care of the school. This helps them “catch the vision” for the school and see the value in less academic/rote work, so that by the time the children are in the preschool, the parents see the value of play-based education and recognize all the ways their children are learning.

The director at Magic School Bus Preschool also mentioned the struggle of helping parents see the value of play-based education. She talked about how schools in Makati or Taguig (the business/finance districts in Manila) are able to achieve a truly play-based preschool more easily because “it’s a very different demographic.” Many of the families are international or have international ties; thus, there are more resources and international influences. She has found that the families in her program that have an OFW (Overseas Foreign Worker) in a country like Singapore or the West, or those who are “very young and hip” are more supportive of the greater emphasis on play and lower emphasis on academics. She shared a story of a family who left their program because it was not academic enough but then returned several months later because their child was so unhappy in a traditional preschool setting. She lamented wanting to help other

parents be more supportive of the program and see its value. She said, “Sadly, I still see a lot of parents with traditional mindsets that believe only rigid academics, tests and worksheets are the means to an excellent education.” She also shared with the researcher about a “competitor who advertises they are play-based and progressive but in practice they aren’t.” She said it is hard to keep up with parental pressure, so she hypothesized that maybe a “*gradual* approach to change” is what’s needed in this culture: slowly introducing play and child-directed activities into the daily schedule and letting parents see what children are learning at those times. The researcher’s appointment for observation was cancelled due to the center closing during the COVID-19 pandemic, so it was not possible to explore whether Magic School Bus was in fact play-based (as the director shared). Of all the preschools in the study, Magic School Bus was the only one that chose not to offer any online preschool to its families for the school year 2020-2021. The director shared in follow-up communication with the researcher that she did not believe a fully online class could really be doable or effective for preschool, and they would resume operation when they could be face-to-face.

Learning Values was the one progressive preschool that mentioned parental expectations and support with a very positive response. The director mentioned that parents were very supportive of their approach to education and, “they say our preschool is different.” Learning Values also shared detailed information both through their promotional material (and at the researcher’s observation/interview) to indicate their high value of academic excellence. The week the researcher was there the children were preparing for their exams, which would take place the following week. There were *Pointers for Review* made available to parents in preparation for the exam. The nursery (3-year-olds) review sheet included things like: skip count by 2s, fraction (1 whole, 1 half), addition 1-5, reading syllables with a, o, I u, e (ba, ke, si, vo,

pu), and reading two syllable words (*kama*, *nene*, yoyo, *sili*, Lulu). The Junior Kinder (4-year-olds) class, where the observation took place, had many items for review in the areas of science, language, math, and reading. For math they were expected to do addition and subtraction 1-10, telling time (o'clock and 30), skip count by 2's and 10's, and use money (coins, bills). For reading they were expected to read CVC words (cat, big) and sight words, plus some 4-letter words they had learned, among other things.

**Teaching Recruitment/Training.** Along with parental expectations, a second theme that emerged in the director interviews was the topic of teacher recruitment and training.

Hearts Preschool is a teacher college and laboratory preschool. The lead teacher in the classroom where the observation was held had a master's degree in Educational Management and had been teaching preschool for 17 years. Her two aides were students of Hearts' teaching college doing their student teaching hours while taking courses. The teacher did mention, however, that she had never received professional development on the value of pretend play or child-directed learning. She stated that she believed that "learners learn best through carefully and collectively designed group and individual activities." Hearts allowed for play at the start of the school day (18 of the 120 minutes were spent in child-initiated activity), with the rest of the day spent in teacher-initiated activities and learning.

City Preschool was also a laboratory preschool connected to a top university in Manila. The classroom teachers were predominantly students or graduates of the college and had spent many hours in observation and participation in the preschool before being hired. The director shared how this training and observation process enabled the teachers to embrace the vision and value of the school, and she likened it to how they involve parents in the younger classrooms to help them also understand the philosophy of the school.

The director at Magic School Bus shared how she recruited teachers who would be able to implement the school's play-based approach. She stated that, "I usually narrow down my list to new graduates, that way educating and training them on our early childhood philosophy, approach and methodology will be easier and more effectual."

The director at Playroom Preschool, who would identify more as culturally Western and previously lived and worked in Europe, talked extensively about teacher training as being necessary to the implementation of a child-centered approach. She trains the teachers outside the classroom and she also spends time every week doing classroom observations and follow-up to help them lead more developmentally appropriate activities. She stated that she believed wholeheartedly in child-initiated activities and play, but that they only work "if the practitioner is trained well." Since their incoming teachers do not have training in play-based or child-centered education, they must conduct training on the job. She said that they "meet somewhere in the middle and train them slowly." The director mentioned to the researcher that when she first arrived to work at the center she was told it was play-based but she observed that everything was *guided*. She voiced frustration that the teachers would often come alongside the children and guide their play or show them how to play, and it was very difficult for them to embrace a completely hands-off, "standing back" approach. However, this approach may actually be a valuable way to encourage creative thinking and form a bridge between adult-initiated and child-initiated activities. East and Southeast Asian cultural environments may find a teacher-guided approach to be a better fit than a fully child-initiated style, for encouraging creative thinking and pretend play in a cultural environment where children look to the teacher for guidance.

## DISCUSSION

In this section, the overall findings of the study will be discussed, aligning with the research questions:

- (a) How much time do the schools devote to child-initiated activity, adult-initiated activity, and adult-guided activity?
- (b) How many open-ended questions are posed by the lead teacher in the two types of preschool?
- (c) How supportive are the different classroom environments of pretend play?
- (d) In progressive/child-centered preschools, how do directors' perceptions of important terms relating to child-directed learning (holistic, experiential, child-centered) impact their philosophy of education and the way they conduct their programs?

The current study found varying amounts of child-initiated activities, open-ended questions, and environmental support of pretend play in the classrooms observed. Additionally, director interviews offered nuance regarding possible cultural influences and barriers to implementing child-directed learning. Through these director interviews and reflection on classroom observations, the researcher also saw discrepancies in the implementation of specific terms relating to child-directed learning.

### **Time Spent in Child-Initiated, Adult-Initiated, or Adult-Guided Activities**

**Child-Initiated Activities.** Child-initiated activity was observed at two of the preschools (Hearts and Playroom), but it was not observed at First Steps (the traditional preschool) or at Learning Values (though children were engaged in free play before the school day started and the observation began). In addition, the child-initiated activity at Hearts (18 minutes) took place at the beginning of the observation and the rest of the observation continued with adult-initiated

activities. In a research study published about the Philippines which examined five preschool environments, several of the teachers mentioned that play was useful as a “time-filler, used while waiting for other children to arrive in the mornings” (Omaga & Alieto, 2019, p. 479). Future studies could shed light on whether this is a typical practice in Philippine preschools. If so, it might mean that these schools rate highly on a checklist like the PPEC, even though the materials are not actually available for children to use in child-initiated activities and free play for much, or any, of the school day. Having these toys and manipulatives displayed may be more about promoting an image of learner-centeredness rather than the actual implementation of a learner-centered approach.

It is possible that in many cases, pretend play materials and outdoor play structures may have been modeled after what is seen in Western literature. However, their uses for developmentally appropriate early childhood education may not come naturally in the cultural environment of the Philippines, and teacher training may not clearly indicate the manner in which these items can be incorporated into learning. For example, at Hearts, where children did engage in play at the start of the school day, this part of the day was totally compartmentalized from the long teacher-directed gathering times rather than being integrated throughout (such as the approach observed at Playroom). This could show that in some settings teachers and directors value child-initiated activities and free play and they see why they are developmentally appropriate, but they do not understand well how to integrate these activities into the “learning” times in the school day. As a result, they are a scheduled part of the day, separate from learning time. Regardless of the underlying reasons, it is notable that outdoor play spaces and pretend play materials are parts of the environment that are underutilized.



**Adult-Initiated Activities.** While coding time spent in adult-initiated activities at each school, the researcher noticed the length of time spent in large-group gathering (also called circle time or gathering time) was substantially longer than typical in Western preschool settings. At First Steps, children sat at their desks while the teacher instructed them as a large group (lesson, singing and dancing together, group activity) for 75 uninterrupted minutes. At Playroom, children had two 25-minute gatherings during the two-hour observation (broken up by play and activities). Learning Values has a circle time for 51 minutes, and Hearts had one gathering of 44 minutes and a second one for 14 minutes (though it is possible this gathering ended early so that the researchers could see outdoor play). Children then returned to the classroom to sit and practice songs together. This is in quite stark contrast to the average circle or gathering times included in research studies about Western preschools, which average around 20-minutes (Bustamante et al., 2018; Chien et al., 2010).

It is also worth noting that circle times have come under criticism in the West for not being an ideal learning environment since they are highly teacher-managed and the activities that take place in these large groups (singing, dancing, repetition/chanting of information) do not allow much space for critical thinking and problem-solving (Bustamante et al., 2018). In the study conducted by Bustamante and colleagues looking at 22 public preschools, researchers found that, “Teachers and children were mostly talking ‘at’ each other as opposed to ‘with’ each other, as the most common types of utterances were general teacher statements or closed questions, whereas children mostly responded to closed questions or repeated verbatim what the teacher said” (Bustamante et al., 2018, p. 627). The same phenomenon was observed in all the preschools visited in this research study, with three of the four teachers asking no open-ended questions at all and one teacher asking only two open-ended questions. Even when questions

were posed to the children, the children yelled out responses in unison and the teachers would then state the “correct” answer(s). Most of the group activities involved singing, chanting rote learning, or listening to the teacher instruct.

Along with the long gathering times, it is notable that activities were often observed where children spent more than five or ten minutes unengaged in an activity themselves but waiting for a turn. For example, the activity at First Steps of placing the paper money into the different boxes took 13 minutes for each child to get a turn. In addition, during the organized PE games at Learning Values, the children waited in large groups for their turn (4 different activities and 75 children waiting in long lines for each activity).

Research has shown that long gatherings and long wait times in preschool environments, during which children are sedentary, are a predictor of children’s physical activity levels *outside* the classroom (Brown et al., 2009). With childhood obesity and challenging behaviors linked to sedentary behavior on the rise in early childhood, these preschool practices may be seen as developmentally inappropriate (Brown et al., 2009; Schmutz et al., 2017). However, it may be important to note that young children in the overcrowded, slow-moving environment of most cities in the Philippines may need to be prepared for standing in long lines, sitting in traffic, etc, and, therefore, there are cultural learning experiences taking place that may not be as valued or necessary in a Western context. In addition, these long periods of time where children are expected to be attentive to the teacher and not directing their own learning may also align with Kwang and Smith’s study which noted that Asian teachers in their study found certain behaviors as undesirable (impulsivity, risk-taking) and saw part of their role as educators to help develop respectful students who are docile and teachable and show respect and deference to their teachers (2004). This will be further addressed below in the discussion of cultural influences.

**Adult-Guided Activities.** Playroom was the one preschool where guided play was observed, and it seemed to align with previous literature and the study's hypothesis that this may be a better approach to completely hands-off child-initiated activities in the Filipino context. It was fascinating during the observation to see how the children struggled in the dramatic play area to pretend freely, and how the teacher's guidance helped "unlock" this. This aligns with Cheung's observations in Chinese preschool classrooms, which noted that children were more creative when a teacher was involved, to some degree. When left entirely to their own initiative, children "quickly ran out of ideas and their thinking became repetitive" (2018, p. 518). In the teacher-guided approach, by contrast, children showed higher levels of involvement, enjoyment, and persistence.

Since this is a scholarship school and a rare example of a progressive school being accessible to the very poor, it seemed to be a window into how children may not naturally "imagine" and play dramatically if this is not how their parents play with them, or if they already have an expectation that this is not appropriate "school" behavior. Previous research suggests that in light of the values and home life of Asian families, Asian children may need more guidance than Western children in their play and exploration. Hoffmann and Russ (2012) point out that "for children to benefit from unstructured playtime, they need some sense of how to play" (p. 116). Additionally, Cheung (2018) found that Chinese students are used to following instructions from the teacher and are not expected to think independently and critically or pose their own questions. Due to this, Cheung (2018) noted low incidences of speculating and risk-taking behaviors during the play activities. This confirms the findings of a previous study, which suggested that by the time a child is in preschool, they may already gain satisfaction from meeting the expectations of their teachers and be unwilling to choose more deviant forms of

thinking and behaving (Cheung, 2017). “While free exploration has been identified as the critical condition for creativity in most Western theories,” Cheung concludes, “the ‘anything goes’ type of freedom is not always equated with high levels of creative thinking behaviors in the Chinese preschool classroom” (2018, p. 524). Based on the observations in this study it seems plausible that similar phenomena would be observable in the Philippine preschool setting, which would suggest that adult-guided approaches may help other programs to move into a more child-initiated/free play environment.

It is also interesting to note that the director at Playroom identified as culturally Western, and the teacher training she engaged in with her teachers was used to encourage them in more play-based approaches and allowing children to play freely in the classroom. As mentioned earlier, she voiced frustration that the teachers struggled to stand back during play. The adult-guided approach observed in the dramatic play area at Playroom could also be a result of the director and classroom teachers “meeting in the middle” (something the director mentioned in the interview).

### **Open-Ended Questions**

During the observations at all four preschools, only two open-ended questions were asked, and both of these were at Hearts preschool. Interestingly, at Hearts, when the teacher tried to facilitate discussion about how we care for others, the children did not produce their own ideas. She encouraged them with starting sentences or reminding them of their past experiences, but ultimately she answered the questions herself with possible ideas. It is possible that a different approach would have better facilitated creative thinking—e.g., longer pauses, writing answers up on the board, showing enthusiasm or sharing some out-of-the-box ideas to provoke

discussion. In contrast, it was normal in all of the classrooms for children to yell out answers in unison—from calling specific greetings to the teacher and friends each morning, to shouting out answers together. It seems that open-ended questions may not be as valued as closed questions for two reasons: (1) an education system focused on memorizing “correct” answers learned from the teacher as expert, and (2) the cultural value of collectivist thinking and group agreement over creative individualism.

It should be noted that open-ended questions are also not commonly observed at gathering/large group times in Western research (Bustamante et al., 2018; Lee & Kinzie, 2012; Whorrall & Cabell, 2016), but are more readily observed during dramatic play experiences (Lee & Kinzie, 2012) and small group activities (Whorrall & Cabell, 2016). Since the bulk of the day for the preschools in the study is spent in large group gatherings, this could be a contributor to the paucity of open-ended questions being asked on any given day. Another factor could be lack of teacher training on the value and technique of using open-ended questions to teach. It is also important to note that cultural expectations of the teacher may play a significant role. In previous literature, research has found that in cultures which see the teacher as a high-status instructor and dispenser of “correct” information, creative ideas or children’s own problem-solving suggestions are sometimes not valued (Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006; Kwang & Smith, 2004).

In reviewing the video recordings, the researcher noted how loud the classrooms were during large group times, with teacher yelling out simple closed questions loud enough for the whole group to hear in a way that prompted children to chant back answers enthusiastically and in unison. Sometimes it was observed that if children yelled out different things, the teacher would reiterate the “correct” response and then have everyone yell it out together again. It is interesting to note that this culture of united answering was seen at all the schools and could

speak to collectivist cultural values, as well as cultural values of children deferring to the teacher out of respect—showing that they are listening and learning. It could be further hypothesized that open-ended questions may feel deviant or countercultural because they leave children without a firm understanding of what is “correct” and how to meet the teacher’s expectation. In some contexts, it may feel irresponsible for a teacher to pose questions this way and possibly serve a sign of poor instruction since it may cause a child to lose face or feel shamed in front of their peers.

### **Pretend Play Environmental Checklist.**

The PPEC was piloted in a both a preschool and a kindergarten classroom at an international school, where the curriculum was very academic, but time was still allotted each day for unstructured play (both indoor and outdoor). It should be noted that the kindergarten classroom scored much higher on the PPEC than the traditional preschool or Learning Values (the progressive preschool with the most academic emphasis), but it was lower than Hearts or Playroom. The high score for the preschool classroom (17/20) and “middle” score (11/20) for the kindergarten could indicate that the international school supports pretend play and sees its importance for early childhood education but also recognizes the importance of moving towards more academic learning in the kindergarten year.

The international preschool (IP) and international kindergarten (IK) classrooms, Hearts Preschool, and Playroom had a dramatic play area; however, the international kindergarten and Playroom were the only environments where it was available for unstructured (child-initiated) play at least 25% of the time. Therefore, on the first two questions, IP and Playroom scored a 5, IK and Hearts scored a 2, and First Steps and Learning Values scored a 0. Interestingly, one

additional question that lined up with dramatic play areas was if role play props were available. All the classrooms that had dramatic play areas also had role play props; whereas if a classroom did not have a designated dramatic play area, it also did not have these play props. The most common pretend play support material was blocks (seen in all classrooms except the traditional preschool), and this is discussed further below.

Unstructured outdoor play was an important aspect of every school day at both the IP and IK; however, of the local schools, it was only observed at Hearts Preschool. Through further discussion with the teacher and director, it was also made clear that it was not a part of every school day—and may have even been a less than weekly occurrence. Possible reasons for the lack of outdoor play are discussed further in the *cultural influences* section.

In addition to the raw data observed, the PPEC served as a useful quantitative measurement that facilitated comparisons across the preschools. As mentioned in the results section, the researchers hypothesized that First Steps may be the most child-centered of the traditional schools planned to be observed, since it had more resources at its disposal. It was surprising to the researchers that it scored 0 points on the PPEC, not even having materials on display for the children (blocks, dolls) that they could use during the wait time before the school day started (instead the children sat unoccupied for 17 minutes before the school day began, most likely longer since this was how they were found at 11:25 when the researchers arrived). Unfortunately, because of the school closures due to COVID-19, other traditional schools could not be observed. Using the PPEC in these different settings could generate important data on the situation in traditional preschool settings in the Philippines.

Three themes emerged from the PPEC. One was the lack of pictures or posters showing children engaged in play activity. The researcher hypothesized that this would be the most

common play-related object in classrooms (since, as is evident throughout this discussion, promotional materials and teacher/director beliefs are often more centered on play and holistic child development than what is actually witnessed in the classroom). The researcher expected pictorial depictions of children playing, even if it wasn't taking place in the classroom. One possible reason for this may be the lack of funding allotted to teachers for classroom materials or decorations.

A second theme was that blocks for building play were seen in all the progressive preschool classrooms, even when there was variance in the amount of other play materials (dolls, kitchen items, role play props). It could be that schools are more likely to acquire and make use of play materials that are easier to link to academic learning (blocks can be used for STEM activities, as well as letter blocks being used for literacy activities).

A third theme was the lack of areas for art exploration, namely painting. Interestingly, Playroom was the only preschool observed that had a space outfitted for painting or art (in their outdoor area). It should be noted that creative/visual arts is an important aspect of the Western definition of holistic learning (Bautista et al., 2016; Wilson, 1994) and a mainstay in most Western preschool classrooms

### **Different Perspectives on Terminology Relating to Child-Directed Learning**

Throughout the study and while trying to exhaustively investigate all research on preschool education in the Philippines, it became apparent that terminology may have different meanings across cultures. The disconnect between the “buzzwords” teachers use and how they are observed to be implemented in the classroom may be an important finding of the study. The research study conducted by Omega and Alieto (2019) examining teaching literacy through play



was the only previous study the researcher found related to child-directed learning and play in the Philippines, in spite of an assiduous search of international journals, local journals, and some unpublished research from the University of Philippines. In this study, active play was understood by the teachers to be a “form of structured, teacher-directed play or games rather than any sort of free-flowing or child-directed play” (Omaga & Alieto, 2019, p. 479). One teacher shared an example of this: “I made them a kangaroo... I let the children wear something with a pouch, and then I said... ok, kangaroo begins with K, so this time you are all going to pick up all the letter K that you can find on the floor and put it inside the pouch” (p. 479). This is a helpful example of the degree to which cultural expectations and views of play in a school setting shape what is regarded as “play.” In this case, the “play” is highly teacher-directed so as to be educational in connection with a defined, closed learning goal. This phenomenon was also noted in studies previously mentioned in the literature review above. For example, in the study conducted by Wu et al. (2018), play observed in Hong Kong preschools resembled highly structured games. Using a Western definition of play, the above description of the teacher’s behavior (making the children kangaroos) would be an adult-initiated activity and not actually play, since the children are not guiding their own experience.

It was notable that structured and teacher-directed activities were defined as “play” at the traditional preschool, First Steps. During the math lesson, children were given an envelope with play money in it. They then proceeded to organize it in order of denomination and take turns depositing it in the correct colored box. What children were allowed to do was dictated by the teacher and corrected when done improperly. However, this activity was viewed by the teacher and director as an opportunity for the children to play. This is also the area where the researcher and coresearcher (reliability coder) disagreed on the PPEC. The coresearcher noted that play

props were available because of the use of the play money (a consensus was then reached, as mentioned above, that it was not an example of this since the prop was not used in “play,” as defined by the study).

The director of First Steps shared that she believed play was important for children and that it had many benefits. She believed that play was beneficial because it helped children to “collaborate and develop skills.” She mentioned “alertness” as an example of a skill, as well as “creativity” and “being sensitive to others.” However, during the observation and completion of the PPEC, the researcher recognized that what “counted” as play was defined very differently by the researcher and the director.

Omaga and Alieto (2019) also pointed out that dramatic play was barely mentioned by the teachers in their study, which they found surprising since so much play literature emphasizes dramatic play (it should be noted that the literature being referenced is written and published in the West). They hypothesized that, “While the teachers recognized the importance of dramatic play, they did not have a professional language to express this knowledge” (p. 480). Basing practices in the classroom on literature and practices developed in a different culture, without teacher training, may help explain some of the phenomena observed in this study. For example, the 4-minutes rest time at Hearts preschool may have originated with an externally developed curriculum designed to include this element, but without instruction on the length or nature of rest time required for it to have its intended effects.

Having a different definition for a word as simple as play can result in wide discrepancies in understanding what a school, director, or teacher means when they highlight the value of play as a method for dispensing knowledge. Similar discrepancies were evident in the way other

terms were used by the preschools in this current study as well, namely *holistic learning* and *experiential learning*.

**Holistic Learning.** In most of the preschools visited, *holistic learning* was a buzz term used when talking about education being child-centered (in director interviews, teacher comments, and promotional materials). This was even true at the traditional preschool. The teacher at First Steps shared her philosophy of education as being based on what her learners needed. She explained, “If they need to learn more on explaining the lesson, my activities are lessen [sic]. If they need the activities for better understanding, I will lessen the discussion and more on activities. These two are needed, you just know your student’s ability to understand the lesson easily.” This shows a teacher who views an approach as child-centered (or holistic) by taking into account the child’s needs; however, the instruction is still completely teacher-initiated, so would not be consistent with child-centered in the Western construct described in this study. It should also be noted that taking in the needs of the learners (holistic learning) in this setting still involved teaching to the class as a whole (adjusting for the whole group) and not individualized instruction. It might be important to note here that in more collectivist cultures, holistic learning may involve addressing the needs of “children as a group,” as opposed to treating each child as a separate individual.

Hearts preschool also discussed in their promotional material that they provided for learning activities in a holistic way by viewing the child as the main source of curriculum. They also discussed the value of play for education. However, the lead teacher described her philosophy like this: “I believe that learners learn best through carefully and collectively designed group and individual activities.” At the observation, 102 of the 120 minutes were spent

in teacher-directed activity; the main focus in this classroom was also on group/joint activity time.

These definitions and classroom experiences were different from what was said at the director interviews at City Preschool and Magic School Bus preschool, where the directors mentioned that children need to be directing their own learning for something to be truly child-centered and holistic. However, observations would have needed to take place at these schools to get a clearer picture of whether such practices were focused on children as separate individuals or the learners more as a group (collectively).

**Experiential Learning.** The different meaning and implementation of an important term was also observed when the director and lead teacher at Learning Values mentioned using “experiential learning” on several occasions to the researchers. The term *experiential learning* has its roots in Froebel, a German educator who is often seen as the father of kindergarten. He believed in children learning through play and personal experience. Experiential learning, the way Froebel envisioned it, involves children taking control of their learning and making meaning of their world. In his book, *The Education of Man* (1908), Froebel wove beautiful word pictures of children exploring their natural surroundings, collecting objects, sorting them, and bringing them to adults to help make meaning of them. He believed that what a child “tries to represent or do he begins to understand” (Froebel, 1908, p. 76). In experiential learning, the parent or teacher observes the children at play and striving to make meaning of their world, and they answer the children’s questions and provide them with materials to continue their experiences. “See and observe the child; he will teach you what to do” (Froebel, 1908, p. 77).

In addition, Dewey expounded on the ideas of experiential learning a century later to clarify what really counts as experiential, since it is simple enough to just state that anything a

child does in the classroom is an “experience”—even rote memorization (Dewey, 1938). Due to this, Dewey stated that, “The central problem of an education based upon experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (Dewey, 1938, p. 27).

Keeping in mind these definitions of experiential from Western literature, it would be difficult to see how bringing ice cream to children for snack time, to be consumed in an air-conditioned classroom with no windows, allows them a true experiential learning experience, especially when the end goal is to learn the answer to the exam question: “What do we eat on a hot, sunny day?” The children are not choosing the experience for themselves and it is not taking place organically. Instead, it is carefully crafted by the teacher to give them a specific experience that will lead them to the desired conclusion, or “right answer.” It is not an opportunity to construct their own meaning and conclusion from the experience.

One of the largest components of the western definition of experiential learning that seems to be missing here is that it be child-directed, with the child constructing meaning and crafting their own experience through creative thinking (Froebel, 1908; Dewey, 1938). This “missing part” of the definition is similar to the missing part in the definition of *holistic learning* or *active play* discussed earlier.

**Cultural Influences.** Prior to this study, the literature on child-directed learning in East Asia pointed to many cultural values and beliefs that may impact the way this pedagogy is implemented in the early childhood classroom. Some cultural values were observed during the current study, and they should be discussed to help the reader get a more complete picture of preschool environments in the Philippines.

Standing in Line/Waiting Turn. It was often expected in both traditional and some of the progressive schools observed that children will be expected to wait for quite a while in line for their turn—or even sit idly waiting for the day to start. This practice seems out of sync with expectations of “developmentally appropriate practices” in the West, where reasonable expectations for how long teachers should expect children to wait for a turn are much shorter. However, these are skills that seem to speak to the cultural value of being able to wait for extremely long periods of time for one’s turn. These are skills that are needed for functioning in a crowded city that involves much standing in line for hours at a time (at the market, at banks, waiting for public transportation). This opens up for discussion the question of whether the skills taught to young children should prepare them for the specific environment in which they live, or an optimal environment that could allow for more creativity and enrichment.

Outdoor Play. There appear to be several cultural barriers to outdoor play in early childhood in the Philippines. Sun exposure and the darkening of skin, as well as illness caused by sweating or getting chilled are two barriers. For example, it is widely believed that tuberculosis (which is endemic in the Philippines) is contracted by being sweaty and then getting chilled (Auer, Sarol, Tanner, & Weiss, 2000). Due to this, children are kept powdered and dry and often have a washcloth, or *bimpo*, tucked in the back of their shirt to absorb sweat. These beliefs may present a hindrance to outdoor play being incorporated into the school day. Most of the schools did not have any time for outdoor play except a special time on Friday (PE) right before going home. It would not be acceptable for sweaty children to return to classroom activity without changing their clothes, so outdoor play becomes a nearly insurmountably difficult inconvenience.

First Steps, Learning Values, and Playroom all had playgrounds that they did not use (First Steps had converted theirs into parking and Learning Values and Playroom had attractive play structures visible to visitors and shown on their promotional material but only used before/after school under parental supervision). Hearts did have an outdoor playground where the children went for 9 minutes during the observation period. It should also be noted that the researchers asked the teacher and director about outdoor time. The teacher said that they occasionally had some outdoor time, if they completed all the day's tasks. (A schedule posted in the classroom labeled 2:40-3:00 as Storytelling/Outdoor Play.) When the teacher mentioned going outside, the children were so excited it seemed apparent to both researchers that this was not a normal occurrence and maybe took place for the benefit of the researchers. It was observed that the children seemed unfamiliar with walking to the play area.

Religion. Though none of the schools in the study were directly affiliated with a church, they all had religious aspects and values. Morning prayers and discussion about God and living in a way to please him were observed at all five schools. The deeply rooted connection between the Philippines with Roman Catholic and then Protestant Christianity seem to make this a “given” for early educational settings and are reminiscent of the public education system in America in its earlier stages. This is true even in the public-school sector. The Philippines’ Department of Education’s curriculum and value statements for preschool education include *Kagandahang Asal* (Values Development) which states that, “Children are expected to show positive attitudes, self-concept, respect, concern for self and others, behave appropriately in various situations and places, manifest love of God, country, and fellowmen” (Republic of the Philippines Department of Education, 2016, p. 5).

## **Barriers to Implementing Child-Directed Learning in Philippine Preschools**

In previous literature examining East Asian contexts, researchers have taken note of barriers that made it difficult to implement child-directed pedagogy. Research suggests that even if educators value child-directed learning, there may be cultural barriers to implementing it in the early childhood classroom—and these barriers can come from teachers, parents, and children (Chafi & Elkhouzai, 2017; Cheung, 2018; Clarke-Stewart et al., 2006; Kwon, 2003). Some of these barriers were discussed above, such as cultural beliefs impacting outdoor play. In addition, a few other barriers are worth noting in detail.

Unlike many other East Asian nations mentioned in the literature, the Philippines has not made pedagogical mandates calling for more child-directed learning. Therefore, in the Philippine context, some of these barriers even come on the government level. This was observed at Playroom, when the director mentioned the Department of Education's pushback on their current pedagogy and pressure to have textbooks for their preschool level classrooms.

Barriers were also observed in connection with parental support. Director interviews seemed to indicate that it was easier to gain parental support when the progressive schools had more of a traditional academic focus (especially administered exams). The director at Learning Values was very optimistic about parental support, but the school also highlighted academic achievements and gave exams. Playroom and City preschool mentioned having to educate parents on the value of their programs, and both schools (along with Magic School Bus) had directors that mentioned parents' concern with lack of academic learning.



## **Limitations**

There were two major limitations of this study that could be addressed with future research. One limitation of this study was an insufficient sample size to allow for robust statistical measurement. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, the sample of schools that could participate shrunk. This is especially noted in the traditional schools, where only one was able to participate in the study.

In addition, the PPEC was a measurement created by the researcher for obtaining data in this study. Therefore, there is no previous data on its validity or reliability. Its continued use in a variety of settings and on a larger scale could provide important insight into its accuracy and usefulness for assessing preschool environments.

## **Implications**

One implication from the current study is that the long gatherings and the high percentage of time spent in adult-initiated activities, along with the lack of open-ended questions, could be barriers to teaching problem-solving and creative thinking. As the literature shows, child-directed learning is a time when children are problem-solving and thinking creatively, so this study has implications for how future teacher education can be done to help effect change. For example, terms related to child-directed learning need to be better taught and understood, so this has implications for practice and how teaching colleges can better educate future early childhood teachers.

This study also has important implications for teacher training. For example, does a teacher not ask open-ended questions in the classroom because they have not been taught the value of these types of questions for children's problem-solving skills and creativity? *Or* are they

aware of this in the abstract, but have not learned how to pose and use such questions? *Or* does a teacher not ask open-ended questions in the classroom because culturally it is inappropriate to put a child on the spot and expect them to come up with an answer themselves (possibly lose face in front of their peers or feel shamed), and making this an undesirable pedagogical approach?

Along similar lines, it is important to discern whether a teacher does not make use of their outdoor play structures because they have not been educated on the value of child-directed outdoor experiential learning, or because they see health risks and feel they have a responsibility to protect the children in their care. Future interventions in teacher training can be developed differently depending on the nature of the barriers to moving forward.

Another implication from this study is that culture needs to be studied more in-depth to create more appropriate means for child-directed learning (the adult-guided activities seen at Playroom, coupled with previous research on adult-guided activities have continued implications for a culturally responsive way to encourage children towards child-directed learning). These findings have implications for what child-directed learning environments might look like in different East Asian and Southeast Asian contexts, and that this may need to be approached differently than in the West. The implications of this study also point to better parent education on the values of child-directed learning.

There are implications from this study on environment support of pretend play. The PPEC points to an understanding that it is not enough to provide certain materials for children in the classroom. They must be made available for free play and teachers and directors must be clear on why they should be in the classroom and what their value is for learning.

## **Future Directions**

In light of the study's findings (and previous research) on differing definitions for important terminology related to early childhood education—play, active play, dramatic play, holistic teaching, experiential learning—it could be valuable to look more closely at the approach to teacher training that takes place in the Philippines. Both Hearts Preschool and City Preschool are laboratory preschools connected to a teaching college (Hearts) and a large university which offers Bachelor's and Master's degrees in early childhood education and child development (City Preschool). Future studies could involve researchers taking courses in ECE or child development at these colleges, conducting interviews with the teachers of these courses and reviewing syllabus/course material, or observing in several sessions of the courses. Conducting interviews with current undergraduate and graduate students about their understanding of these terms and the teaching/training they are receiving could also be helpful in contributing to an understanding of early childhood education in the Philippines and cultural influences that may impact training.

In addition to looking at teacher training to shed light on differing understandings of terminology relating to child-directed learning, a follow-up study similar to the current study could be more robust by including a questionnaire with different examples of children doing classroom activities and asking the teacher/director to identify which ones are examples of play. For example, a vignette might describe something that looked similar to what was seen at First Steps: "The teacher has passed out play money to all the children. They are shown how to order their money from smallest to largest denomination, then they get to place their bills into corresponding colored donation boxes that represent different charities." Understanding whether teachers and directors view this type of activity as play could have significant implications for future training in child-directed learning.

During the researcher's visit to City Preschool, the director took her on a tour of the facilities and shared about how the university's education and child development students (undergraduate and graduate) spend significant time in the center, observing how they implement their vision in the classroom and being a part of that implementation. This introduces additional consideration for future research to explore what happens to all the education and child development graduates once they receive their degrees and head into the workforce. Where do they end up teaching? What barriers do they encounter as they seek to implement what they have learned and practiced —pressure and pushback from parents, school directors, the government, or some combination of these three? Learning from graduates what stands in the way of good implementation will be a key first step to breaking down those barriers or implementing specific educational opportunities that will allow them to effect change. For example, if research showed parental disapproval to be a large barrier, offering an undergraduate course (or part of a course) focused on communicating with parents and cultivating parental involvement and support could be immensely helpful.

The PPEC shed some light on possible future directions as well. It could be used in further studies, especially in large scale studies to see if it is helpful in assessing classroom environments and may have statistical significance when compared to concepts similar to this study (adult-initiated/child-initiated environments) but also social/emotional development in classrooms, academic achievement (early literacy skills), creativity/critical thinking skills, etc. For example, further observations at Western preschools using the PPEC could illuminate differences in play-based expectations across cultures.

One phenomenon observed when using the PPEC in this study was that blocks were seen in all preschool environments except the traditional preschool classroom. It could be

hypothesized that since blocks can also be used for structured adult-initiated or adult-guided activities, they may be more widely available in classrooms – and may be a good starting point for helping to educate teachers, directors, and parents on the value of child-directed learning. Studies that directly examine how block play is observed in different settings (open-ended or for academic/teacher-led activities) could also be enlightening. In the study conducted by Omega & Alieto (2019), blocks were mentioned by all the teachers as common materials they use in their classrooms; for example, teachers describe using letter blocks to support fine motor skills and pre-literacy skills . It should be noted that block play was observed at all three progressive preschools (Learning Values, Hearts, and Playroom), and it was done creatively and in an open-ended manner.

Some adjustments to the PPEC could also be made to allow it to be used more broadly or more effectively. For example, an update on the PPEC to include a question about designated space for art exploration could make the checklist more robust and allow its usage to highlight more concepts relating to early childhood education. It could also be adjusted to include a question about whether toys and materials are available for use during the school day, just as the checklist measures whether outdoor play spaces are not only available, but used during the school day, since it seemed, in light of this study and the research of Omega and Alieto (2019), that materials may be a part of classrooms (possibly modeled on Western preschools or to make promotional materials look good and draw in families) but are not actually implemented into the classroom day or the curriculum.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the current study helped to build a better understanding of preschool education in a Philippine context, both traditionally and when more progressive/child-centered approaches are implemented. By conducting observations and director interviews at progressive/child-centered preschools—and comparing those to a traditional preschool setting—this research developed a clearer understanding of the prevalence and characteristics of child-directed learning in a Philippine preschool context. The study also contributed to continued discussion of how cultural values shape pedagogy in early childhood education, especially in connection with defining important terminology and the implementation of Western mandates in a Southeast Asian context.

Though this study was limited in its scope, it offered important insight into the ways in which cultural beliefs about teachers' roles impact the way child-directed learning is perceived and implemented. At the same time, the research illuminated how cultural beliefs about individualism/collectivism, religion, respect for teachers, and even dangers to one's physical health impact common approaches to early childhood education in the Philippines. This information is important for pointing a way forward for future lines of inquiry. Research on culture and pedagogy must continue if educators are to better understand how cultural values must be taken into account in the development and implementation of best practices.

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## TABLES

Table 1. Results from Preschool Observations.<sup>1</sup>

Pseudonym	Type of School	Minutes of Adult-Initiated Activity	Minutes of Adult-Guided Activity	Minutes of Child-initiated Activity	Open-ended Questions	Pretend Play Environmental Checklist Score (/20)
First Steps	Traditional	120	0	0	0	0
Learning Values	Progressive	120	0	0	0	6
Hearts	Progressive	102	0	18	2	14
Playroom	Progressive	69	18	33	0	13
Magic School Bus	Progressive	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
City preschool	Progressive	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

<sup>1</sup> Observations were a total of 120 minutes.

Table 2. Pretend Play Environmental Checklist Scoring.

Checklist Question	Piloted - Traditional International Preschool 17/20	Piloted – Traditional International Kindergarten 11/20	First Steps (Traditional) 0/20	Learning Values (Progressive) 6/20	Hearts (Progressive) 14/20	Playroom (Progressive) 13/20
Designated Dramatic Play Area (2 pts)	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Unstructured play in dramatic play area at least 25% of observation period (3 pts)	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Role Play Props (2 pts)	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Dolls/Baby Care Items (2 pts)	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Play Food/Kitchen Items (2 pts)	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Blocks for building Play (2 pts)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Children observed combining objects from different play sets for pretend play-without discouragement from the teacher (2 pts)	No	No	No	No	Yes	No
Unstructured Outdoor Play (2 pts)	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Teacher rotates “themed” boxes for play into classroom (2 pts)	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes

Table 2. Continued

Posters/Pictures depicting children in play (not clipart labels) (1 pt)	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: IRB Approval Form

IRB-FY2020-438 - Initial: Initial Approval

irb@missouristate.edu <irb@missouristate.edu>

Thu 1/23/2020 12:58 AM

To: King, Elizabeth K <EKing@MissouriState.edu>; Pardue, Teri J <Pardue116@live.missouristate.edu>



To:

Elizabeth King  
Childhood Ed & Fam Studies

**RE:** Notice of IRB Approval

**Submission Type:** Initial

**Study #:** IRB-FY2020-438

**Study Title:** Child-Directed Learning in Varying Contexts: An Examination of Preschools in the Philippines

**Decision:** Approved

**Approval Date:** January 20, 2020

This submission has been approved by the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

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This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:

**PI:** Elizabeth King

**Co-PI:**

**Primary Contact:** Teri Pardue

**Other Investigators:** Hannah Galanza

## **Appendix B: Program Director Interview Form**

**Missouri State University**

### **Program Director Interview**

**Project Title: Observing Classroom Activities in Philippine Preschools**

**Project Director: Teri J. Pardue**

**Co-Researcher: Hannah Galanza**

**Faculty Advisor: Dr. Elizabeth K. King**

1. Describe your philosophy of education when it comes to how children learn best in early childhood.
2. What are the contributing factors to why you approach early childhood education in this way?
3. How does this play out in your preschool program?

*\*The researcher will ask these broad questions in an interview and may have more probing questions afterward if the Director's responses require further explanation.*



## **Appendix C: Non-Participation Video Consent for Video Recording Form**

**Missouri State University**

### **Non-Participation Video Consent for Video Recording**

**Project Title: Observing Classroom Activities in Philippine Preschools**

**Project Director: Teri J. Pardue**

**Co-Researcher: Hannah Galanza**

**Faculty Advisor: Dr. Elizabeth K. King**

My name is Teri Pardue, and I will be doing a research project for my master's thesis on classroom activities in Philippine preschools. I am excited to inform you that your child's preschool is participating in this endeavor.

This letter is to inform you that the study will involve one day of video recording in your child's classroom. Videos will be saved on a password-protected device and then destroyed after the completion of the project. The video recordings will be viewed to observe teachers' classroom practices only. The children's behaviors/speech/etc will not be documented or researched. The video footage will only be viewed by the research study personnel.

If you are uncomfortable with your child appearing on video, please fill out the information below and return this form to your child's teacher within one week. If you are comfortable with your child appearing on video, there is no need to return this form.

     I am not comfortable with my child appearing on video and would like any video recording of the classroom to exclude my child (check if you agree).

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_

Your child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Your signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Pretend Play Environmental Checklist

### 20 Point Scale

1. Is there a designated dramatic play area in the classroom? (2pts)
2. If so, is the area available for unstructured play for at least 25% of observation period—30 minutes total of the 2-hour observation. (3pts).  
(For 5 points total for this area)
3. Are role play props available? For example: dress up clothes, doctor kits, cash register, mailbox, recycled computers or phones. (2 pts)
4. Are dolls and baby care items available? (2 pts)
5. Are play food and kitchen items available? (2 pts)
6. Are blocks provided for building play on an open shelf or bin where the children can access them? (2 pts)
7. Children combine objects from different play sets for pretend play without being discouraged by the teacher. (2 pts)
8. During outdoor time, the children are allowed to play freely and not required to participate in a structured game or activity (2pts)
9. The researcher asked the teacher if she keeps different boxes of materials (for different theme play like firefighters, pilots, restaurant, doctors office) and the answer was yes. (2 pts)
10. Are there posters or pictures hung in the classroom that depict children engaged in play? (1 pt)