

# Preschool Teachers' Sensibility in Music and Visual Arts as a Foundation for Encouraging Creative Expression in Children

Blaženka Bačlija Sušić and Marijana Županić Benić  
University of Zagreb, Faculty of Teacher Education

## Abstract

*Active participation in art activities has a positive effect on the development of creativity and sensibility in children, as well as their emotional development, which is usually neglected in contemporary education due to the continuous development and influence of technology on education. The purpose of this study is to investigate how often preschool teachers encourage children to creatively express themselves through music and visual arts based on the preschool teachers' sensibility and interest in the arts, which are developed through after-school art education and visits to art-related events, such as art exhibitions or musical performances. Data were collected through an anonymous questionnaire on a sample of 137 preschool teachers attending the graduate studies program of Early Childhood and Preschool Education. The participants who engaged in after-school art education, visited art exhibitions, and attended musical events, conducted art activities more frequently than those who rarely attended those types of events. The results highlight the importance of the preschool teachers' sensibility and interest in music and visual arts for facilitating the holistic development of children by encouraging them to participate in art activities from an early age.*

**Key words:** *creativity encouragement; early childhood and preschool education; music creation; visual arts creation.*

## Introduction

Art and artwork have a significant effect on the holistic development of children during early childhood and preschool, which are considered to be the "golden age" of creativity, so some authors refer to children as the embodiment of human creativity

(Glavenau, 2011). Creativity is considered to be a human trait that can be developed through education (Sharp, 2001), and it is important in the contemporary world, where it can be used in situations that require creative approaches in expression or problem-solving. However, Zimmerman (2009) argues that the development of creativity through education tends to be targeted only in the arts.

Early childhood is considered an important stage of creativity development, and creativity is strongly associated with the arts. Sharp (2001) emphasizes the significance of creative programs in the arts during early childhood and preschool education, as well as the importance of play implemented as a fundamental activity that encourages children's creativity.

According to Mendeš, Ivon, and Pivac (2012), creativity is "a child's immanent tendency of development" (p. 113) because children have an innate interest that drives them to explore and discover their environment and process their experiences through creative expressions. Children can enter art activities spontaneously and through play because playing allows them to process and recreate the world they interact with. They organize what is familiar using new approaches, thus creating by combining, adding, improving, and transposing (Miljak, 1996; Šagud, 2002), which are the essential elements of every artistic thought and process. Art is a form of natural language with which all human beings are born because of their creative abilities (Hayman, 1980, as cited in Mendeš et al., 2012), but the extent of creativity development depends on the educational process and sociocultural factors they are exposed to during early childhood (Rogoff, 2003). According to Malaguzzi (1994), from the perspective of Reggio pedagogy a child is a creative being with the ability to use "hundreds" of expressive methods. Programs designed to stimulate creativity can help children understand the world around them and develop relationships among individual elements of the world, as well as increase their adaptability, imagination, and problem-solving skills (Benlliure et al., 2013). Eisner (2008) emphasizes the importance of art activities because they can: (a) improve the holistic learning experience, (b) increase a person's attention span, (c) develop an understanding for the significance of nuances and that which is subtle, (d) facilitate the dimensions of spontaneity, invention, and insight, (e) develop/improve the quantitative and qualitative experiences of things, (f) promote the scope and diversity of knowledge, (g) develop an appreciation for sensibility and intuition, and (h) help people understand the importance of developing imagination as one of the most important human faculties.

Children's culture consists of art and culture, and it is an important element of play and learning. Therefore, impressions from art and cultural activities in society must be represented in their daily activities in kindergarten (Ese, Jensen, & Lørvik Waterhouse, 2007). The development and encouragement of creativity in children through the arts depends also on the attitudes of preschool teachers regarding the importance of art activities, as well as their own sensibility for the arts. Robinson (2011, 2015) argues that formal education inhibits children's creative potential and considers

that preschool teachers are not trained in the arts and are not aware how important nurturing children's imagination is.

The extent to which preschool teachers introduce the arts to children depends on their own interest and sensibility in a specific art form. Beliefs and attitudes about teaching different art forms (i.e., dance, drama, media, music, and visual arts) are indicative of the preschool teachers' abilities to conduct art activities. If their experiences with the arts are positive, preschool teachers will also likely conduct art activities in kindergartens, but if their experiences are negative, they will probably limit the exposure of children to the arts or completely neglect art activities (Garvis & Pendergast, 2010). The preschool teachers' beliefs about the arts are formed during their initial teacher education, as well as their previous personal and professional experiences. Their beliefs will determine their decisions, which in turn will determine their behaviors (Silverman, 2007; Trent & Dixon, 2004; Weiner, 2003). According to Garvis and Riek (2010), the three fundamental problems faced by pre-service preschool teachers and associated with art education during early childhood are: insufficient time devoted to art education, insecurity of pre-service teachers prevents them from conducting art activities, and the effects of previous experiences in the arts on their current attitudes and beliefs about the role of art in education.

If different art forms are well-represented in the process of education and the preschool teachers harbor positive attitudes and beliefs about the importance of children's creative development, the educational process will facilitate the creative and emotional development of children, as well as various other abilities and traits that the arts nurture, including perception, motivation, self-confidence, self-efficacy, communication, social skills, fine motor skills, empathy, and multiple types of intelligence (Bleed, 2005; Hallam, 2010).

It is understandable that preschool teachers who are personally interested in visual arts will also more likely conduct visual activities with children in a manner that allows them to decide which visual techniques they will use, whereas preschool teachers who are personally interested mainly in music will focus their efforts on encouraging children to participate in music activities. Although art has an important role in the development of creative potential during early childhood, preschool teachers must be familiar with appropriate teaching methods to facilitate holistic development.

Visual arts have an important role in contemporary education. In addition to encouraging and supporting creative development, empathy, spatial intelligence, and visual development from an early age, visual literacy is an essential skill in a world that is based on visual methods of communication (Bleed, 2005). Therefore, visual arts can affect the social competences of children because it allows them to better understand the world and their actions in it (Freedman, 2000). It is important to note that visual arts develop creativity and other capabilities in children only when preschool teachers give them freedom to explore works of art on their own, as well as the freedom to experiment with visual expression and creation (Einarsdottir, Dockett,

& Perry, 2009). Visual-creative activities allow children to explore how they can express their thoughts, ideas, and experiences of the external world using different materials and techniques. The role of preschool teachers is to prepare, encourage, and motivate children to express themselves using visual arts in an environment that is designed and organized to facilitate creative processes and encourage creative activities (Balić Šimrak, Šverko, & Županić Benić, 2010).

Music and music activities also facilitate the holistic development in children. Hallam (2009) elaborates on the empirical evidence that supports the positive effects of active participation in music activities on the intellectual, social, and personal development of children. Koutsoupidou and Hargreaves (2009) studied six-year-old children to determine how children with the opportunity to learn music through experience and improvisation compare to those children exposed to classical approaches to learning music. Based on the results of Webster's Measurement of Creative Thinking in Music, the authors reported significant differences between the groups in terms of musical extensiveness, flexibility, originality, and syntax because the opportunity to learn through improvisation facilitates the development of creative thinking, whereas the traditional didactic approach to music education inhibits it. Those results suggest that creative thinking can be developed only if music education and activities are based on creative activities. Nevertheless, creativity is the result of musical knowledge, so it is important to learn and adopt a certain musical vocabulary (Kodály, 1983). That is why the first step in music education is to gain proficiency in certain elements that children will later be able to combine in order to creatively express themselves and create an original work of art.

McPherson and Williamon (2006) consider the environment children are exposed to and the opportunities provided by their parents and other adults have a significant impact on the development of their musical potential. Numerous researchers reported that teachers and preschool teachers do not feel competent enough to sing and play instruments with children (Hallam et al., 2009; Hennessy, 2000; Ruddock & Leong, 2005; Russell-Bowie, 2009; Seddon & Biasutti, 2008; Stunell, 2010; Young, 2009), so it is important to improve their beliefs and self-efficacy to facilitate the development of competences in the arts and their application in education (Garvis & Pendergast, 2011).

### ***Aim and Research Problems***

The aim of this study was to determine how often preschool teachers in early childhood and preschool settings use music and visual arts activities in the education process based on their sensibility and interest for those art forms. The following research problems were defined:

- Assess the relationship between the preschool teachers' participation in after-school art education and the frequency of conducting music and visual arts activities in the education process.

- Assess the relationship between the frequency of preschool teachers' visits to visual arts exhibitions and the frequency of conducting music and visual arts activities in the education process.
- Assess the relationship between the frequency of preschool teachers' visits to music art events and the frequency of conducting music and visual arts activities in the education process.

## Methods

### Participants

An anonymous questionnaire was administered to 137 students enrolled in the fourth and fifth years of the graduate university study program Early Childhood and Preschool Education at the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb. A total of 68 students reported being born in Zagreb, whereas the other students have been residing in Zagreb since their enrollment at the Faculty of Teacher Education. The sample characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
*Sample characteristics*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Sex	Female	135	99.26
	Male	1	0.74
Age	22-32	106	78.52
	33-43	21	15.56
	44-54	8	5.39
	55-65	0	0.00
High school education	Grammar school	75	54.74
	Vocational	61	44.53
	Art school	1	0.73
Additional art education	Music	25	18.25
	Visual arts	11	8.03
	Other	23	16.79
	None	78	56.93
Visiting art exhibits	Never	29	21.32
	Once per year	65	47.79
	Several times per year	40	29.41
	Once per month	2	1.47
	Every week	0	0.00
Visiting artistic music events	Never	14	10.53
	Once per year	39	29.32
	Several times per year	69	51.88
	Once per month	11	0.08
	Every week	0	0.00

## Instrument

An anonymous questionnaire was designed to collect participants' demographic data and self-reported frequency of conducting visual arts and music activities at their workplace. The questionnaire was also designed to collect the participants' demographic information and assess their interest for the arts. In accordance with the research problems, the variables used in this study were additional art education, frequency of visiting art exhibitions, and frequency of attending artistic music events. Additional art education refers to the participants' experiences and participation in after-school programs that teach music, visual arts, or other art forms (e.g., folklore, dance, etc.). In order to assess the frequency of preschool teachers' visits to art exhibitions and attendance of music events, the following responses were offered to the participants: never, once per year, several times per year, once per month, and every week.

The frequency of conducting music and visual arts activities in the education process was assessed using 42 items. The items were grouped by the following four subscales: music activities ( $\alpha = .81$ ), visual arts activities ( $\alpha = .85$ ), music-creative activities ( $\alpha = .91$ ), and visual-creative activities ( $\alpha = .90$ ). The participants answered the question "How often do you conduct [music/visual arts/music-creative/visual-creative] activities in the education process?" A 5-point scale was used to collect the participants' responses: 1 – never, 2 – rarely, 3 – sometimes, 4 – often, 5 – regularly.

## Results

The descriptive statistics of the composite dependent variables is shown in Table 2. The preschool teachers reported conducting visual-creative activities and music activities more often than music-creative activities and visual arts activities. All composite variables were normally distributed, so parametric tests were used to investigate how often preschool teachers conduct art activities based on their self-reported participation in the arts through after-school art activities, as well as reports on their frequency of visiting art exhibits and attending music events.

Table 2

*Descriptive statistics of composite dependent variables*

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Skew	Kurtosis	D
Music activities	137	3.51	0.67	-0.23	-0.41	0.06
Music-creative activities	137	3.15	0.87	0.14	-0.67	0.06
Visual activities	137	2.99	0.63	-0.01	-0.72	0.07
Visual-creative activities	137	3.70	0.77	-0.36	-0.20	0.05

Notes. D = Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results, SD = standard deviation

According to the ANOVA results presented in Table 3, additional art education had a significant effect on conducting music activities, but there were no observed effects on the frequency of conducting other types of art activities. Visiting art exhibits and

attending artistic music events had a significant effect on how often preschool teachers conducted all types of music and visual arts activities. Pairwise comparisons between groups were conducted using the Bonferroni correction (i.e., the Bonferroni method) because that approach is valid for comparing both equal and unequal group sizes, and it also effectively controls the family-wise error rate given its conservative estimates of confidence intervals (NIST/SEMATECH, 2013).

Table 3

*Effects of after-school art education, visiting art exhibits, and attending music events on how often preschool teachers conduct art activities, ANOVA results*

Variable	Additional art education	Visiting art exhibits	Attending artistic music events
Music activities	3.53*	4.03**	3.58*
Music-creative activities	0.83	5.77***	5.26**
Visual activities	1.94	4.67**	4.49**
Visual-creative activities	1.18	7.24***	3.11*

Notes. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Participants who had participated in after-school music education reported conducting music activities more often than those who had participated in after-school visual arts activities,  $t = 2.42$ ,  $p = .046$ , or had not participated in any art forms apart from those required in mandatory education,  $t = 2.44$ ,  $p = .044$ . However, participants who had participated in after-school music education did not conduct music activities more often than those who had participated in other after-school art forms, such as dancing and folklore.

Additional music education, as well as additional experience with other art forms such as visual arts, dance, folklore, etc. affects the confidence and self-assessment of preschool teachers. They feel competent performing art activities and a high sensibility for those types of activities, so they are also more likely to encourage children to participate in artistic and creative activities. Kelly (1998), Richards (1999), and Dees (2004) point out the significance of additional music education training for preschool teachers. Vannata-Hall (2010) investigated the possibility of increasing the preschool teachers' competences for teaching music, establishing that skills and competences in music alone are not sufficient to effectively teach it. The preschool teachers' sense of self-efficacy must also be developed through training because that is the first step and foundation for gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to appreciate the significance of music education.

Jalongo (1999) considers that the preschool and primary school teachers' insecurities in their own artistic abilities have a negative effect on their pupils' artistic expressions, so lifelong learning and training in the arts is considered important for preschool and primary school teachers who are required to conduct art activities with children.

The average results and standard deviations for dependent variables according to frequency of visiting art exhibitions are shown in Table 4. None of the participants

visited art exhibitions every week, and only two participants visited art exhibitions once per month, so those categories were excluded from the analysis. Participants who visited visual art exhibitions several times per year also conducted: music activities more often than participants who visited exhibitions once per year,  $t = 2.62, p = .013$ , or never,  $t = .72, p = .010$ ; music-creative activities more often than participants who visited exhibits once per year,  $t = 2.99, p = .004$ , or never,  $t = 3.31, p = .001$ ; art activities more often than participants who visited exhibitions once per year,  $t = 2.35, p = .028$ , or never,  $t = 2.14, p = .049$ ; visual-creative activities more often than participants who visited exhibitions once per year,  $t = 2.82, p = .007$ , or never,  $t = 3.89, p = .0001$ .

Table 4

*Frequency of conducting art activities based on preschool teachers' frequency of visits to visual art exhibitions*

Variable	Never	Once per year	Several times per year
Music activities	3.32 ± 0.62	3.41 ± 0.66	3.79 ± 0.62
Music-creative activities	2.83 ± 0.79	3.02 ± 0.85	3.56 ± 0.81
Visual activities	2.85 ± 0.69	2.89 ± 0.59	3.21 ± 0.57
Visual-creative activities	3.34 ± 0.75	3.63 ± 0.75	4.08 ± 0.66

Whereas some authors (Ehrlin & Wallerstedt, 2014) found that preschool teachers consider music and visual art skills as innate, Kempe and West (2010) consider those skills to be conditioned. After reviewing 30 years of education research focused on further art training designed for pre-service teachers, Garvis and Riek (2010) reported three fundamental problems: insufficient time devoted to art education, lack of confidence required to participate in art activities, and the effects of previous experiences in the arts on the willingness to conduct and participate in art activities.

Preschool teachers who have high sensibility for visual arts, which in this study is indicated by how often they visit art exhibits, are also more likely to conduct visual, music, visual-creative and music-creative activities than preschool teachers who show no interest for visual art exhibits. The aforementioned result is expected because previous studies (Bleed, 2005; Hallam, 2010) reported similar results, according to which preschool teachers with an increased sensibility and interest in a certain art form are also more likely to conduct creative activities in kindergarten.

Table 5 shows the average results and standard deviation of the dependent variables based on how often preschool teachers attend artistic music events. Considering the fact that none of the participants reported visiting a music event every week, that category was excluded from the analysis. According to the post-hoc test, it was found that participants who attend artistic music events several times per year were significantly more likely to conduct music activities with children compared to participants who reported attending those events only once per year,  $t = 2.45, p = .043$ . Participants who reported attending artistic music events once per year also reported conducting visual arts activities less frequently than those participants who reported attending those events several times per year,  $t = -2.40, p = .049$ , or once per month,  $t = -2.85, p = .013$ . Participants who attended artistic music events several times



per year also conducted visual activities more often than participants who reported visiting those events only once per year,  $t = 3.46, p = .002$ .

Table 5

*Frequency of conducting art activities based on preschool teachers' frequency of visits to artistic music events*

Variable	Never	Once per year	Several times per year	Once per month
Music activities	3.30 ± 0.64	3.28 ± 0.63	3.63 ± 0.69	3.78 ± 0.53
Music-creative activities	3.11 ± 0.78	2.72 ± 0.84	3.38 ± 0.86	3.47 ± 0.78
Visual activities	2.83 ± 0.53	2.76 ± 0.70	3.10 ± 0.58	3.41 ± 0.54
Visual-creative activities	3.41 ± 0.77	3.49 ± 0.88	3.87 ± 0.66	3.89 ± 0.87

It is interesting to note that preschool teachers who attended artistic music events conducted visual activities more often than other participants. Those results indicate that, for example, participants who also visit music activities should not necessarily be selected to conduct only music activities. The aforementioned outcome suggests that interest and sensibility in one art form are not necessarily indicative of bias towards that particular art form in the education process. This means that preschool teachers interested in one art form, in the context of this study either music or visual arts, will more likely conduct both music and visual arts activities more often than preschool teachers who are not interested in either of the two art forms. It is possible that preschool teachers interested in one art form are able to provide a better environment that promotes participation in art activities in general (Jensen, 2001) and allows children to creatively express themselves (Balić-Šimrak et al., 2010) using different types of art forms.

Following the assumption that kindergartens and elementary schools need to function like cultural workshops in which children and adults collaboratively research and create, teacher education students attending the early childhood and preschool teacher education study program in Oslo, Norway have the opportunity to choose the arts as their area of specialization, so they gain knowledge and skills in visual arts, drama, music, and poetry (Ese et al., 2007). The duration of that specialization is one semester, and teaching experiences are an essential requirement during the specialization because they allow the students to learn how to create meaningful dialogues between different art forms and children in practice. Students are also involved in several practical projects that encourage children to explore and express their own creative experiences and feelings via creative processes in kindergarten. Visiting cultural institutions and events (i.e., museums, exhibits, theaters, concerts, and other art events) is an essential part of additional art education provided at the early childhood and preschool teacher education study program in Oslo, Norway (Ese et al., 2007). In addition to organizing teaching experiences through which students gain practical teaching skills and confidence while working with children, students should visit current cultural events to further develop their cultural awareness through personal experiences.

## Conclusion

Preschool teachers in early childhood and preschool education who have a certain level of sensibility and interest for the arts, which in this study was assessed based on how often preschool teachers visited visual arts and artistic music events, are also more likely to conduct music, visual arts, music-creative, and visual-creative activities compared to preschool teachers who are not interested in those types of events and exhibits. That outcome of the study was expected because previous studies (Bleed, 2005; Hallam, 2010) reported similar results, which showed that a high level of sensibility and personal interest in one or more art forms indicate spending more time conducting creative activities when working with children. Feeney and Moravick (1987) argue that it is important to provide children with the opportunity to gain aesthetic experiences as using arts to express feelings and ideas comes naturally to children. Therefore, using additional art education implemented at the early childhood and preschool teacher education study program in Oslo, Norway as an example (Ese et al., 2007), Croatian teacher education students should also have a similar opportunity to develop their interest and sensibility in the arts during their initial education.

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**Blaženka Bačlija Sušić**

University of Zagreb, Faculty of Teacher Education,  
Savska cesta 77, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia  
[blazenkabs@gmail.com](mailto:blazenkabs@gmail.com)

**Marijana Županić Benić**

University of Zagreb, Faculty of Teacher Education,  
Savska cesta 77, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia  
[marijana.zbenic@ufzg.hr](mailto:marijana.zbenic@ufzg.hr)

# Glazbeni i likovni senzibilitet odgojitelja kao temelj poticanja dječjeg stvaralačkog izraza

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## Sažetak

*Aktivno sudjelovanje u umjetničkim aktivnostima utječe na razvoj djetetove kreativnosti, senzibilizira ga te obogaćuje njegov emocionalni razvoj koji je u današnje vrijeme često zapostavljen zbog neminovnog razvoja i utjecaja tehnologije. Cilj je ovoga rada utvrditi koliko često odgojitelji potiču kreativan izraz djece provođenjem glazbenih i likovnih umjetničkih aktivnosti ovisno o njihovu senzibilitetu i interesu za navedena umjetnička područja, koje razvijaju dodatnim umjetničkim obrazovanjem, posjećivanjem likovnih i glazbenih umjetničkih događanja. Istraživanje je provedeno na uzorku od 137 odgojitelja, studenata diplomskog studija Ranog i predškolskog odgoja koji su upisom navedenog studija pokazali interes i želju za daljnjim usavršavanjem i razvojem svojih profesionalnih kompetencija. Kao instrument za prikupljanje podataka koristio se anonimni anketni upitnik, konstruiran za potrebe ovog istraživanja. Učestalost provođenja aktivnosti na području glazbene i likovne umjetnosti u vrtiću ovisila je o području umjetnosti kojim su se ispitanici dodatno bavili uz redovito školovanje, ali ne i o trajanju dodatnog umjetničkog obrazovanja. Oni ispitanici koji češće posjećuju likovne izložbe i glazbena umjetnička događanja izjasnili su se da značajno češće provode umjetničke aktivnosti u odnosu na ispitanike koji rjeđe posjećuju takva događanja. Rezultatima ovog istraživanja stječe se uvid u stanje provođenja umjetničkih aktivnosti s djecom rane i predškolske dobi u odgojno-obrazovnoj praksi. Ukazuje se i na važnost senzibiliteta i interesa odgojitelja u umjetničkom području za cjelovit razvoj djece, koji se ostvaruje poticanjem njihova sudjelovanja u umjetničkim aktivnostima od rane dobi.*

**Ključne riječi:** *glazbeno stvaralaštvo; likovno stvaralaštvo; odgojitelji; poticanje kreativnosti; rani i predškolski odgoj.*