

THE ARTGROUND EXPERIMENT:

*Examining Engagement, Learning and Flow
in a Purpose-Built Children's Arts Centre*

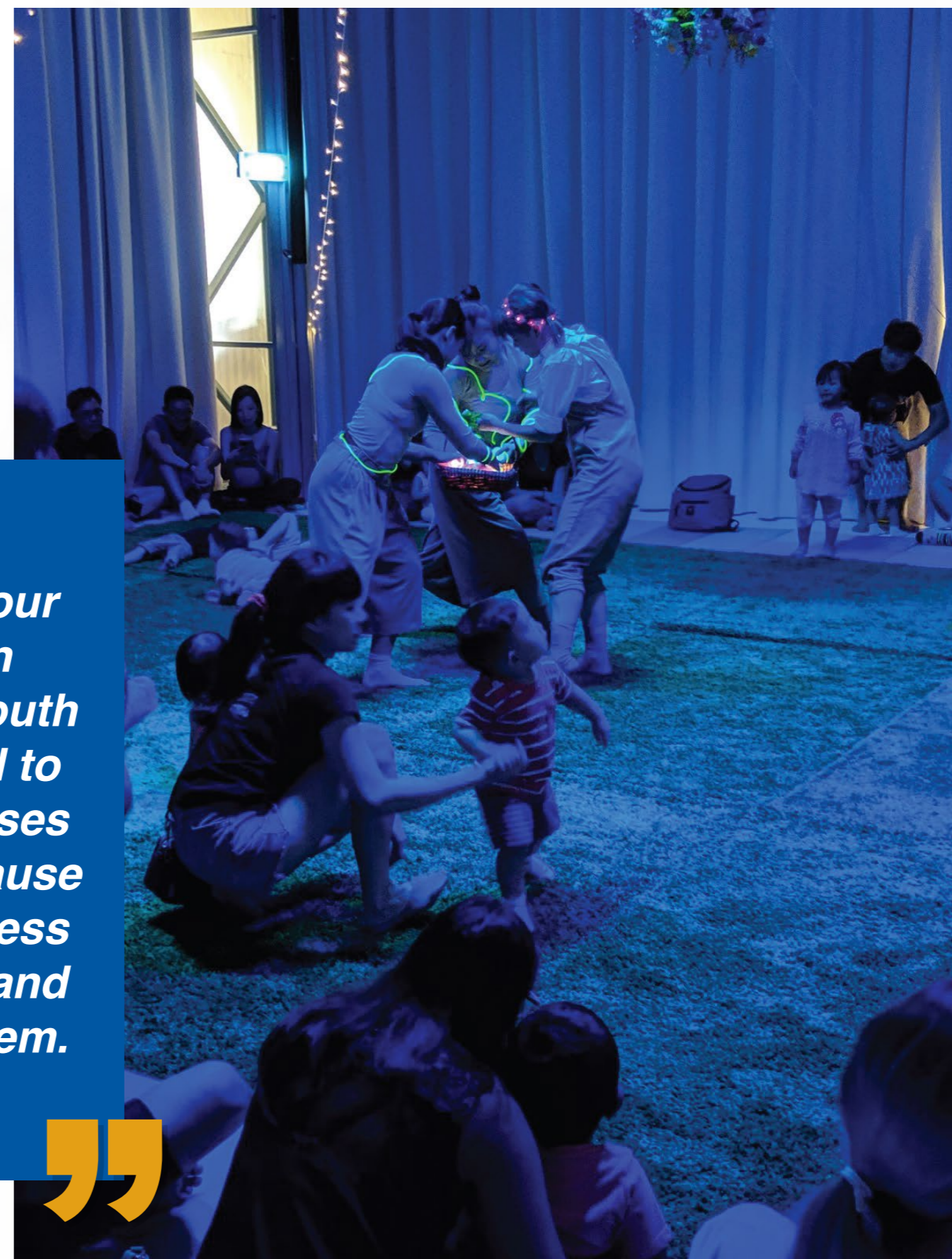
Dr Jennifer Wong from the Visual and Performing Arts Academic Group (VPA AG) is an applied theatre practitioner who has worked with children and youth in marginalized or vulnerable settings for at least 15 years now. She observed first-hand when she first started working in applied theatre on how the behaviours and dispositions of children and youth shift when they engage in theatre and arts. It was this curiosity that led her to read up extensively on participatory theatre and arts, and their impact on child and youth development.

At that time, Dr Wong noted that most of the research studies were conducted in Western contexts. This further fuelled her inquisitiveness, "I wondered if our Singaporean children and youth might respond to theatre processes differently because of the uniqueness of our culture and academic system." The desire to uncover the "hows" and "whys" propelled her to complete her Doctor of Philosophy in 2019 and started her on a journey in research at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (NIE NTU, Singapore).

In 2016, an open call by the National Arts Council (NAC) to find partners to explore the possibility of setting up a children's arts centre (The Artground) at the Goodman Arts Centre led Dr Wong's research team, comprising team members Associate Professor Lum Chee Hoo and Associate Professor Leonard Tan (both from the VPA AG), to successfully apply for a partnership grant to fund their research project.



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GRANTS AND RESEARCH ADVANCEMENT



The research project – The Artground (TAG) Experiment: Examining Engagement, Learning and Flow in a Purpose-built Children’s Arts Centre – sought to understand how TAG could cultivate curiosity and creativity in children through the space and programmes, and study the possible psychological benefits of being engaged in and through the arts. NAC was also keen to understand the efficacy of TAG in meeting the needs and demands of building a children’s arts centre. This resulted in the partnership grant being offered as a collaborative effort to study an initiative by the NAC.

“The research team and NAC shared similar objectives and aims in this project and that resulted in a fairly seamless process when we discussed the outcomes and deliverables of the study,” quipped Dr Wong. “In addition, A/P Lum and A/P Tan are both figures of authority in arts and music education fraternities with extensive research knowledge. They gave me very good advice throughout the entire research process. I was very fortunate to have them as team members, supporting and working with me, in my first research grant.”

Dr Wong and her research team found that the purposes and intentions of TAG centred on the provision of arts experiences for children and families across a variety of art forms. TAG had adopted a tiered approach to this, offering a range of arts experiences or programmes at different levels of access.



By removing barriers to participation such as financial and cultural capacity, TAG sought to effectively engage and develop audiences. While cultivating curiosity and creativity in children through playful behaviours or interactions within its visual arts space and weekend arts programmes, the study found that children were indeed highly engaged in different types of play, through which tacit and reflective learning also occurred.

The weekend arts programmes presented in TAG’s WhiteBox complemented these playful explorations within the visual arts space. They enhanced the children’s engagement and experience with the arts, by exposing them to different forms of art and art making. Finally, in examining the phenomenological experiences of children at TAG through the lens of flow, it was found that the children were highly engaged in the visual arts spaces, most notably expressing that they were fun. Three themes also emerged from the data: environment, enjoyment, and evaluation. They interacted with one another to enable the children’s experiences of flow at TAG.

The grant enabled the very close examination of the first purpose-built children’s art playspace that also acts as an incubation centre for artists interested in developing works for young audiences.

What Dr Wong found most gratifying throughout the research project was having observed that the research project benefited the team from TAG through the many conversations and interviews with the researchers from NIE. “The questions we posed dug deeper into the critical thinking and creative processes of the TAG team where we (NIE research team) became an external lens that provided immediate feedback and reflections to the arts programmes and works,” added Dr Wong.

Reflecting on what the grant had helped achieved, Dr Wong shared, “The grant enabled the very close examination of the first purpose-built children’s art playspace that also acts as an incubation centre for artists interested in developing works for young audiences.” With the grant and strong support from NAC, the research team was able to spend 18 months in close examination of the artistic creation of the playspace and interactive programmes where the findings potentially could contribute to studies in early childhood education and arts education fields beyond Singapore.

Dr Wong Pui Cheng, Jennifer

Visual and Performing Arts Academic Group

Project title: The Artground Experiment: Examining Engagement, Learning and Flow in a Purpose-Built Children’s Arts Centre

Source of Funding: National Arts Council (NAC)

To find out more about research grants and funding, visit www.nie.edu.sg/gpl/rgm or “GPL-Managed Grants” via NIE Staff Portal.