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FROM GUIDANCE TO GROWTH: TEACHER-CHILD INTERACTIONS IN MALAYSIAN PRESCHOOLS

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Abstract: Teacher–child interactions form the foundation of early childhood education, shaping both immediate learning experiences and long-term developmental outcomes. This study employs a convergent mixed-methods approach combining classroom observations, teacher interviews, and parent surveys to examine the dynamics of teacher–child relationships in Malaysian preschools. Findings reveal that effective engagement, characterised by warmth, responsiveness, and scaffolding, enhances children's socio-emotional development, language acquisition, and readiness for formal schooling. The analysis underscores the influence of Malaysian cultural values of respect, community, and care on pedagogical practices, while also highlighting the role of digital tools in enriching exchanges and supporting differentiated instruction. Quantitative results demonstrate significant associations between teacher behaviours and child outcomes, while qualitative insights provide vivid accounts of guidance and emotional support. The study contributes by showing how collectivist cultural norms shape interactional warmth and scaffolding in preschool classrooms, offering a perspective distinct from individualistic Western models. Recommendations include strengthening teacher training in responsive pedagogy, integrating digital resources into curricula, and fostering collaborative family partnerships to sustain developmental progress. Ultimately, teacher–child interactions are positioned not as routine exchanges but as pivotal moments of guidance that nurture growth, resilience, and confidence in young learners, with implications for both Malaysian policy and global discourses on inclusive early learning.

Keyword: Teacher-child interactions, early childhood education, Malaysian preschools, responsive pedagogy, child development

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education (ECE) is widely recognised as a critical stage in human development, laying the foundation for lifelong learning, socialisation, and emotional well-being. Within this formative period, teacher–child interactions play a pivotal role in shaping children's experiences and outcomes. These interactions extend beyond the transmission of knowledge; they embody guidance, care, and scaffolding that nurture growth in cognitive, social, and emotional domains. In Malaysia, where preschool education has expanded rapidly in response to national policy priorities and global educational commitments, understanding the nature and quality of teacher–child interactions is both timely and essential.

The Malaysian preschool landscape is characterised by diversity in institutional settings, pedagogical approaches, and cultural influences. Public and private preschools coexist, each reflecting different philosophies of early learning. While national frameworks emphasise holistic child development, the lived reality of teacher–child interactions often depends on contextual factors such as teacher training, classroom resources, and parental expectations. National quality indicators reveal persistent gaps, with a significant proportion of teachers lacking formal ECE training, underscoring the urgency of examining classroom practices. In the post-COVID-19 era,

renewed emphasis on socio-emotional reconnection further highlights the importance of responsive and supportive teacher–child relationships.

Globally, research has demonstrated that responsive teacher–child interactions foster positive developmental trajectories. Warmth, sensitivity, and scaffolding are consistently linked to improved language acquisition, social competence, and emotional regulation. Yet, much of this literature originates from Western contexts, raising questions about its applicability in Southeast Asia. Malaysia's cultural values respect for authority, communal responsibility, and emphasis on care have shaped the dynamics of teacher–child relationships in distinctive ways. This study bridges that gap by situating Malaysian preschool practices within broader global discourses, while foregrounding the cultural and institutional realities of the local context.

The study reflects the dual role of teacher–child interactions: teachers provide guidance through structured and responsive engagement, while children experience growth across multiple developmental domains. Conceptually, guidance represents teacher actions, and growth represents child outcomes. By analysing these interactions, the study highlights their transformative potential, not only for individual learners but also for the broader institutional and cultural landscape of early childhood education in Malaysia.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The significance of teacher–child interactions has been extensively documented in early childhood research. Vygotskian perspectives emphasise the role of social interaction in cognitive development, particularly through scaffolding within the zone of proximal development. Similarly, attachment theory underscores the importance of secure, responsive relationships in fostering emotional resilience. These theoretical frameworks converge on the idea that teacher–child interactions are central to learning and development, linking teacher behaviours directly to child outcomes.

Empirical studies reinforce these insights. Research in North America and Europe has shown that high-quality teacher–child interactions predict gains in literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional skills. Classrooms characterised by warmth, responsiveness, and instructional support consistently outperform those with more directive or detached approaches. However, the cultural specificity of these findings necessitates caution when applying them to non-Western contexts. Recent studies in Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia highlight Southeast Asian perspectives, showing how collectivist values and community-oriented practices shape interactional warmth and discipline in ways distinct from Western models.

In Malaysia, early childhood education has undergone significant transformation over the past two decades. Government initiatives, such as the National Preschool Curriculum Standards (NPCS), emphasise holistic development across cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains. Teacher training programmes have expanded, yet challenges remain in ensuring consistent quality across diverse preschool settings. Studies have noted disparities in teacher preparedness, classroom resources, and pedagogical approaches, all of which influence the nature of teacher–child interactions. Approximately one-third of preschool teachers still lack formal ECE training, underscoring the urgency of strengthening classroom practice.

Cultural values further shape these dynamics. Malaysian society places strong emphasis on respect for elders, communal harmony, and nurturing care. These values manifest in preschool classrooms, where teachers

often adopt roles that blend authority with caregiving. While this can foster respect and discipline, it may also limit opportunities for child-led exploration if not balanced with responsiveness and scaffolding. Understanding how these cultural factors intersect with pedagogical practices is crucial for advancing inclusive and effective early childhood education.

Digital pedagogy adds another layer of complexity. Tools such as YouTube, interactive apps, and screen-mediated platforms are increasingly used to support language learning and differentiated instruction. These resources can enrich teacher–child interactions by providing engaging opportunities for communication and exploration. At the same time, global studies caution that technology must complement rather than replace human interaction, ensuring that digital enrichment enhances rather than diminishes relational warmth. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of teacher–child interactions in Malaysian preschools. By situating local practices within global theoretical and empirical frameworks, the research aims to contribute to both national policy discussions and international scholarship on early childhood education.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite Malaysia's commitment to strengthening early childhood education, challenges persist in ensuring high-quality teacher–child interactions across diverse preschool settings. While national frameworks emphasise holistic development, the lived reality in classrooms often reflects inconsistencies in teacher preparedness, pedagogical approaches, and resource availability. Surveys indicate that a substantial proportion of teachers lack sufficient training in responsive pedagogy, resulting in interactions that are more directive than supportive. This limits opportunities for children to engage in exploratory learning, develop socio-emotional skills, and build confidence in their abilities.

Cultural values also present both opportunities and challenges. Respect for authority and communal harmony are deeply embedded in Malaysian society, shaping teacher–child dynamics in ways that emphasise discipline and care. However, without balanced responsiveness, these values may inadvertently restrict child-led exploration and creativity. Furthermore, the integration of digital tools into preschool classrooms remains uneven, with some teachers leveraging technology to enrich interactions while others struggle to adapt, leading to disparities in children's access to digital enrichment.

Existing research on teacher–child interactions in Malaysia is limited, with most studies focusing on curriculum implementation or policy frameworks rather than the micro-level dynamics of classroom relationships. This gap in knowledge hinders efforts to design evidence-based interventions that enhance both child outcomes and institutional quality. Addressing this problem requires a systematic examination of teacher–child interactions in Malaysian preschools, situating them within both local cultural contexts and global discourses on early childhood education. By doing so, the study aims to generate insights that inform teacher training, curriculum design, and policy reform, ultimately strengthening the foundations of preschool education in Malaysia.

OBJECTIVES

This study aims to:

1. Examine the nature and quality of teacher-child interactions in Malaysian preschools, focusing on dimensions such as warmth, responsiveness, scaffolding, and communication.
2. Analyze the influence of cultural values on teacher-child dynamics, particularly how respect, care, and communal responsibility shape pedagogical practices.
3. Evaluate the role of digital tools in enriching teacher-child interactions, with emphasis on language learning and differentiated instruction.
4. Propose recommendations for strengthening teacher training, curriculum design, and family partnerships, ensuring that teacher-child interactions serve as catalysts for holistic child development and institutional excellence.

By pursuing these objectives, the study aims to generate insights that inform both national policy and global scholarship, positioning Malaysian preschools as sites of innovation and developmental growth.

METHODS

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture the complexity of teacher–child interactions in Malaysian preschools. The rationale for this design lies in the belief that numerical data alone cannot fully describe the richness of human relationships, while narratives alone may lack generalisability. By combining both strands and converging them at the interpretation stage, the research provides a holistic understanding of how teachers guide, support, and nurture children's growth.

Participants

Four preschools in Malaysia were purposively selected to represent diversity in institutional type (public and private), geographical location (urban and semi-urban), and cultural composition. Participants included:

- Teachers (n = 20) with varying levels of professional training and years of experience.
- Children (n = 80) aged between 4 and 6 years, observed in natural classroom settings.
- Parents (n = 40) who provided perspectives on teacher–child interactions through surveys.
- Administrators (n = 4) interviewed to understand institutional priorities and challenges.

This sampling strategy ensured that voices from multiple stakeholders were included, reflecting the communal nature of early childhood education in Malaysia. A summary table of participant groups, numbers, and demographics has been added to enhance clarity.

Data Collection

Three complementary methods were employed:

- Classroom observations were conducted over six weeks, focusing on teacher–child exchanges during structured lessons, playtime, and routine activities. Observations were guided by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), emphasising emotional support, classroom organisation, and instructional support. Two trained raters independently coded interactions, achieving inter-rater reliability (ICC = 0.87).

- Semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators explored perceptions of effective interactions, challenges faced, and cultural influences. Parents were asked about expectations of teacher–child relationships and their children's growth. Interviews were conducted in both English and Malay, depending on participant preference, to ensure comfort and authenticity.
- Surveys distributed to parents and teachers captured quantitative data on perceptions of warmth, responsiveness, and instructional quality. Likert-scale items measured agreement with statements such as "My child's teacher encourages exploration" and "Teachers respond sensitively to children's needs." Reliability of the survey instruments was confirmed through pilot testing and Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.82$).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board (Approval Code: EDU/2025/04). Informed consent was secured from all adult participants, and parental consent was obtained for child observations. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymising data, and participation was voluntary. The research was conducted with sensitivity to cultural norms, ensuring that teachers and families felt respected and valued throughout the process.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data, including interview transcripts and observation notes, were analysed using thematic analysis. Codes were developed inductively, allowing themes such as "warmth," "discipline," "scaffolding," and "digital enrichment" to emerge naturally. Quantitative data from surveys were analysed using descriptive statistics to identify patterns and inferential tests (independent t-tests and ANOVA) to explore differences across preschool types, with significance set at $p < 0.05$. Findings from both strands were triangulated, ensuring that qualitative insights enriched quantitative trends and vice versa. This integration strengthened the validity of the conclusions. Trustworthiness and Rigor Credibility was ensured through multiple strategies. Triangulation was achieved across data sources, including teachers, parents, administrators, and children. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with teachers to confirm accuracy. Peer debriefing involved discussions with fellow researchers to challenge assumptions and interpretations. Thick description was provided, offering detailed accounts of classroom contexts to allow readers to assess transferability.

Limitations

While the study provides valuable insights, limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size, though diverse, was relatively small and may not capture the full range of Malaysian preschool experiences. Observations were limited to six weeks, which may not reflect long-term dynamics. Additionally, cultural nuances may have influenced how participants expressed themselves in interviews, particularly in contexts where deference to authority is valued. These limitations, however, do not diminish the contribution of the study but rather highlight areas for future research.

FINDINGS

The analysis of teacher–child interactions in Malaysian preschools revealed four major themes: warmth and responsiveness, discipline and authority, scaffolding and exploration, and digital enrichment. Together, these themes illustrate how teachers balance guidance with opportunities for growth, reflecting both cultural values and pedagogical practices.

Warmth and Responsiveness

Across all observed classrooms, teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to nurturing relationships with children. Warmth was expressed through affectionate greetings, gentle encouragement, and attentive listening. For example, one teacher knelt to meet a child at eye level, softly reassuring them when they hesitated to join a group activity. Such moments conveyed emotional safety, allowing children to feel valued and supported.

Survey data confirmed this pattern: 87% of parents (n = 40) agreed that teachers responded sensitively to their children's needs. These differences are summarised in Table 1 (t-test results), which shows that warmth is consistently valued across public and private preschools. Teachers themselves described responsiveness as "being present" and "reading the child's emotions," highlighting the relational dimension of pedagogy.

Scaffolding and Exploration

A particularly striking finding was the use of scaffolding to support children's learning. Teachers frequently guided children through tasks by breaking them into manageable steps, offering prompts, and celebrating small successes. For instance, during a counting activity, a teacher encouraged a child by saying, *"Let's try together—what comes after three?"* This gentle prompting enabled the child to succeed while building confidence.

Exploration was also encouraged, though to varying degrees across preschools. As shown in Table 1 (t-test results), children in resource-rich classrooms scored significantly higher on exploration opportunities compared to those in less resourced settings, confirming that institutional resources strongly shape scaffolding practices. In more resource-rich settings, teachers facilitated play-based learning, allowing children to experiment with blocks, art materials, and role-play. In less resourced classrooms, exploration was more limited, with teachers relying on rote instruction. This disparity highlights the influence of institutional context on the quality of teacher–child interactions. These findings underscore that warmth is not incidental but central to Malaysian preschool practice, aligning with cultural values of care and communal responsibility.

Table 1

Independent Samples t-Test Results for Teacher–Child Interaction Dimensions

Dimension	Group Comparison	M (SD) Group 1	M (SD) Group 2	t(df)	p-value
Warmth & Responsiveness	Public vs. Private preschools	—	—	t(38) = 1.12	.268

Scaffolding & Exploration	Resource-rich vs. less resourced classrooms	4.21 (0.62)	3.58 (0.71)	t(78) = 3.02	.004**

Table 1 demonstrates how specific dimensions of teacher–child interactions varied across different classroom contexts. For *warmth and responsiveness*, the independent samples t-test showed no significant difference between public and private preschools (p = .268), confirming that relational warmth is consistently valued across settings. In contrast, *scaffolding and exploration* revealed a significant difference (p = .004), with children in resource-rich classrooms experiencing more opportunities for guided exploration compared to those in less resourced environments. This finding quantitatively supports the qualitative observations that institutional resources strongly shape pedagogical practices.

Discipline and Authority

While warmth was evident, discipline also featured prominently in teacher–child interactions. Teachers often emphasised respect for rules and authority, reflecting broader societal norms. Classroom observations showed teachers using firm but calm voices to redirect behaviour, such as reminding children to share toys or sit quietly during storytime.

Interviews revealed that teachers viewed discipline as essential for creating a structured environment. One teacher explained, *"Children need boundaries to feel secure. Discipline is not punishment; it is guidance."* Parents echoed this sentiment, with 72% agreeing that teachers balanced discipline with care. The variation across preschool types is evident in Table 2 (ANOVA results), which highlights significant differences in perceptions of discipline and authority. However, some children appeared hesitant to express themselves freely in highly structured settings, suggesting that authority, if overemphasised, may limit opportunities for creativity and exploration.

Digital Enrichment

The integration of digital tools emerged as a growing trend. Teachers in urban preschools frequently used YouTube videos and interactive apps to support language learning and storytelling. As shown in Table 2 (ANOVA results), urban preschools reported significantly higher integration of digital tools compared to semi-urban preschools, confirming disparities in access and the need for equitable resource allocation. Children responded enthusiastically, often singing along or repeating phrases from digital content. Teachers noted that technology provided "a bridge" for children who struggled with traditional instruction, particularly in English language acquisition.

However, digital enrichment was uneven across settings. In semi-urban preschools, limited access to devices and internet connectivity restricted opportunities. Some teachers expressed concern that overreliance on screens might reduce face-to-face interaction. Nevertheless, when used thoughtfully, digital tools enriched teacher–child exchanges by adding variety and engagement.

Digital Enrichment ANOVA results demonstrated a significant effect of preschool location on digital enrichment scores ($F(2, 77) = 6.89$, $p = .002$). Urban preschools reported higher integration of digital tools (M

= 4.35, SD = 0.55) compared to semi-urban preschools (M = 3.72, SD = 0.68). These findings confirm disparities in access and highlight the need for equitable resource allocation.

Table 2
ANOVA Results for Teacher–Child Interaction Dimensions

Dimension	Group Comparison	F(df)	p-value	Group Means (SDs)
Discipline & Authority	Preschool type (Public, Private, Semi-urban)	F(2, 37) = 4.56	.017*	—
Digital Enrichment	Preschool location (Urban, Semi-urban, Public)	F(2, 77) = 6.89	.002**	Urban: 4.35 (0.55); Semi-urban: 3.72 (0.68)

Table 2 highlights differences across multiple preschool types. For discipline and authority, the ANOVA indicated significant variation (p = .017), suggesting that perceptions of balanced discipline differ depending on institutional setting. Private preschools were generally rated higher in balancing discipline with care compared to semi-urban public preschools. For *digital enrichment*, the ANOVA results were highly significant (p = .002), showing that urban preschools integrate digital tools more effectively than semi-urban ones. This confirms disparities in access and underscores the need for equitable resource allocation.

Together, these tables provide statistical rigor to the mixed-methods design. They validate the narrative themes by showing that while warmth is universal, scaffolding, discipline, and digital enrichment vary significantly across contexts. The integration of quantitative evidence strengthens the argument that teacher–child interactions in Malaysian preschools are shaped not only by cultural values but also by institutional resources and pedagogical choices.

Integrative Insights

Taken together, these findings reveal that teacher–child interactions in Malaysian preschools are multifaceted, blending warmth, discipline, scaffolding, and digital innovation. The interplay of these elements reflects cultural values while also responding to global educational trends.

- Warmth and responsiveness foster emotional security and trust.
- Discipline and authority provide structure but must be balanced to avoid limiting creativity.
- Scaffolding and exploration empower children to learn actively and confidently.
- Digital enrichment expands opportunities but requires equitable access and mindful integration.

Importantly, the findings suggest that teacher–child interactions are not static but adaptive, shaped by institutional resources, cultural expectations, and pedagogical choices. Teachers act as guides, balancing authority with care, and structure with exploration. Children, in turn, grow through these interactions, developing resilience, confidence, and readiness for formal schooling.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted nature of teacher–child interactions in Malaysian preschools, revealing a delicate balance between warmth, discipline, scaffolding, and digital enrichment. These

themes resonate with global literature on early childhood education while also reflecting the unique cultural and institutional contexts of Malaysia. In discussing these results, three key dimensions emerge: interpretation of results, cultural and policy implications, and practical recommendations.

Interpretation of Results

The study reinforces the theoretical view that teacher–child interactions are central to early learning. Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding is vividly illustrated in the way teachers guided children through tasks, breaking them into manageable steps and celebrating small successes. These practices not only supported cognitive development but also nurtured confidence and resilience. Similarly, attachment theory is reflected in the warmth and responsiveness observed in classrooms, where teachers provided emotional security that enabled children to engage more fully in learning.

Importantly, the findings suggest that teacher–child interactions are not routine exchanges but transformative practices. When teachers combine warmth with structure, and guidance with opportunities for exploration, they create environments where children thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. This dual role of guidance and growth underscores the title of the study, positioning teacher–child interactions as catalysts for holistic development. In addition, the statistical results presented in Tables 1 and 2 further validate these themes, showing that while warmth is consistently valued across settings, scaffolding, discipline, and digital enrichment vary significantly depending on institutional resources and preschool type.

Cultural and Policy Implications

The Malaysian context adds distinctive layers to these interactions. Cultural values of respect, communal harmony, and care shape teacher–child dynamics in ways that emphasise discipline alongside warmth. While this balance provides structure and security, it also raises questions about how much space is given to child-led exploration and creativity. While collectivist norms foster communal care, they may inadvertently constrain autonomy unless balanced with responsive scaffolding. The challenge for Malaysian preschools is to honour cultural values while ensuring that children have opportunities to express themselves freely and develop autonomy. The challenge for Malaysian preschools is to honour cultural values while ensuring that children have opportunities to express themselves freely and develop autonomy.

Policy frameworks such as the National Preschool Curriculum Standards (NPCS) emphasise holistic development, yet implementation varies across settings. Resource disparities between urban and semi-urban preschools influence the extent to which teachers can facilitate exploration and integrate digital tools. Addressing these inequities is essential if Malaysia is to achieve consistent quality in early childhood education.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the growing role of digital pedagogy. While technology enriched teacher–child interactions in urban preschools, limited access in semi-urban contexts created gaps. Policymakers must consider strategies to ensure equitable access to digital resources, alongside training for teachers to integrate technology thoughtfully without diminishing face-to-face interaction.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The study points to several actionable steps:

- Enhancing teacher training in responsive pedagogy through Ministry-approved in-service modules.
- Promoting family partnerships to sustain socio-emotional growth.
- Ensuring equitable resource allocation across diverse preschool settings.
- Strengthening digital competence training so teachers can integrate technology effectively, with measurable improvements in CLASS scores.

By prioritising these recommendations, Malaysia can strengthen the foundations of preschool education and ensure that teacher–child interactions continue to serve as transformative practices.

CONCLUSION

This study positions teacher–child interactions as a cornerstone of preschool education in Malaysia, affirming their role in nurturing children's socio-emotional development, language acquisition, and readiness for lifelong learning. By blending warmth, responsiveness, discipline, scaffolding, and digital enrichment, teachers create environments that foster resilience, confidence, and holistic growth.

The research concludes that teacher–child interactions are not merely exchanges of instruction but pivotal moments of guidance that shape developmental trajectories. To strengthen these practices, recommendations include enhancing teacher training in responsive pedagogy, integrating digital resources thoughtfully, promoting collaborative partnerships with families, and addressing resource disparities across preschool settings. These steps align with national priorities and support the enhancement of the National Preschool Curriculum Standards (NPCS) to ensure emotional and instructional responsiveness in classrooms.

Ultimately, Malaysian preschool classrooms exemplify how cultural values of respect, care, and community can be harmonised with global educational trends. By reframing teacher–child interactions as inclusive and transformative practices, this study contributes to both national policy and international scholarship. Looking ahead, future multistate studies could replicate these findings across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, further strengthening the evidence base for responsive and culturally grounded early childhood education. The integration of qualitative insights with statistical evidence (Tables 1 and 2) underscores the robustness of these findings, ensuring that the conclusions are not only culturally grounded but also empirically validated. By embedding responsive pedagogy and equitable digital access into national preschool standards, Malaysia can serve as a model for inclusive early childhood practices across Southeast Asia.

Ultimately, Malaysian preschool classrooms exemplify how cultural values of respect, care, and community can be harmonised with global educational trends. By reframing teacher–child interactions as inclusive and transformative practices, this study contributes to both national policy and international scholarship. Looking ahead, future multistate studies could replicate these findings across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts, further strengthening the evidence base for responsive and culturally grounded early childhood education.

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