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Humanizing Preschool Management in Malaysia: Future Practices in Environment, Human Resources, and Safety

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, preschool education is not compulsory and is influenced by cultural diversity, which creates both opportunities and challenges for management. This study examines how preschools in Kuala Lumpur apply humanized management in three areas: environment, human resources, and safety. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a senior teacher and a kindergarten manager. Transcripts were reviewed with participants and analyzed thematically. The preschools had child-friendly facilities such as low washbasins and participatory staff meetings. At the same time, problems remained, including limited exploration areas, low salaries, narrow training focused only on first aid, and weak mental health support. Safety measures were uneven, with drills often skipped. These issues may reflect limited funding and prioritization in preschool management, as well as systemic challenges in staff training and welfare support. To improve, preschools should create more inclusive environments, expand teacher training, provide clearer career paths, and strengthen safety procedures. Wider regional studies are recommended for a fuller picture. This study underscores the importance of balancing child-centered learning environments with staff wellbeing, providing guidance for more humane and effective preschool management practices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education is increasingly recognized as a crucial foundation for lifelong learning and holistic development. In Malaysia's culturally diverse context, applying humanizing education principles in kindergartens presents both opportunities and challenges. Humanizing education not only emphasizes pedagogical approaches that consider the whole child but also requires supportive institutional systems that promote teachers' professional development, emotional wellbeing, and humane workplace policies (Dewi et al., 2025).

Malaysia's early childhood care and education (ECCE) system operates outside the formal compulsory education framework, offering developmental learning opportunities for children prior to primary school entry. The ECCE stage is served by a variety of providers across public and private sectors, creating a diverse educational landscape (Rahmatullah et al., 2021). This creates differences in educational quality and access. Families with better financial means can choose high-quality private kindergartens, while GENIUS Centers serve children from low-income families in rural areas, showing socioeconomic gaps in access to quality early childhood education.

All registered preschools serving children aged 4-6 must follow the National Preschool Standards-Based Curriculum (KSPK) under the Malaysian Education Act 1996. The Act also introduced inclusive education provisions for children with learning difficulties. However, how kindergartens actually implement humanizing education principles in their management is not well understood, especially in Malaysia's multicultural context where kindergartens follow different ethnic customs and traditions.

Existing research on early childhood education in Malaysia has primarily focused on curriculum implementation, pedagogical strategies, and children's academic or developmental outcomes, with particular attention to STEM-focused teaching practices Ghazali et al. (2024), teachers' competencies in instructional approaches Yee Ng & Mohamed (2025), and challenges related to curriculum standards and implementation (Ridza, 2024). In contrast, comparatively little attention has been given to preschool management practices that shape teachers' working conditions, support staff well-being, and influence children's everyday experiences, including the design of physical environments, staff support systems, and the implementation of health and safety measures.

This study looks at how Malaysian kindergartens implement humanized management practices in three areas: physical environment, human resource management, and health and safety. Through interviews with teachers and administrators from Kuala Lumpur kindergartens, the research explores current practices, challenges, and strategies for creating more humanized learning environments. The main research question is: How do Malaysian kindergartens implement humanized management practices, and what factors help or hinder these efforts?

The findings will help kindergarten administrators and teachers understand how to create better environments for children and educators. This research are expected to contribute not only to a more comprehensive understanding of preschool management in Malaysia but also to practical guidance for administrators and policymakers aiming to enhance early childhood education quality while promoting more humane and supportive working conditions in multicultural contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Humane management is increasingly recognized as an effective alternative to traditional administrative models. At its core, it emphasizes respect, empathy, and a holistic concern for staff well-being—essential elements in fostering a supportive working environment (Oliveira & Araújo, 2025). In the field of education, this approach highlights emotional guidance and the cultivation of self-discipline. Rather than relying solely on rigid institutional rules, humane education promotes the subtle influence of emotion to help both teachers and students internalize a sense of discipline, ultimately creating a warm, understanding, and respectful school climate that supports positive learning outcomes (Huang, 2022). At the same time, in the process of humanized management, it is also important to effectively utilize the power of motivation and recognize its role (Lemoine et al., 2019).

Moreover, humane education adopts a child-centred perspective, focusing on autonomy, emotional well-being, and individualized learning needs to support children's holistic development (Winarko & Budiwati, 2024). This philosophy closely aligns with trends identified by the (OECD, 2021), which notes that most participating countries have curriculum frameworks that are "child-centred, play-based, and built on a holistic vision of the child." These frameworks encourage educators to adapt learning experiences flexibly according to each child's needs and local context, thereby fostering meaningful interactions and supporting both emotional and cognitive growth.

One key area of humane management in early childhood settings is the design of the physical environment. Classrooms should be flexible, warm, and safe, incorporating natural elements that create a comfortable atmosphere conducive to learning and engagement. Evans (2021) argues that children's cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being are directly shaped by their surroundings. Factors like noise, overcrowding, and pollution can hinder development, while clean, quiet, and well-organized spaces promote effective learning.

This is supported by recent evidence showing that classroom physical design features—such as indoor plants, window views, seating arrangements, and wall and furniture colors—have measurable effects on children's stress levels, attention, mood, and psychological restoration, suggesting that the physical environment plays a meaningful role in shaping children's cognitive and emotional responses in learning settings (Meng & Zhang, 2025).

A humane perspective is equally vital in human resource management. Recognizing the unique personalities and emotional needs of educators—and offering meaningful professional development opportunities—can significantly enhance teaching quality and improve retention (Mondejar & Asio, 2022). Beyond basic safety policies, kindergartens should also provide emotional and psychological support to staff. Recent research indicates that when teachers experience a strong sense of belonging and supportive workplace relationships, they report higher levels of professional wellbeing and organisational commitment, contributing to greater resilience and intentions to remain in the profession (Melzak et al., 2025).

Teacher well-being not only impacts their personal experience but also has a ripple effect on students through emotional contagion and classroom dynamics. When educators are supported mentally and emotionally, they are better equipped to provide children with responsive, emotionally attuned care, fostering a positive cycle of interaction. Melzak et al. (2025) establishing open communication channels and support systems can help build trust and psychological safety among staff and students alike—key components for a sustainable and thriving educational environment.

In short, numerous studies affirm the importance of integrating humane management principles across all levels of early childhood education. By embedding these values into

practice, early childhood centres can create environments where both teachers and children flourish, leading to higher-quality education and healthier developmental outcomes.

2. METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to examine humanistic management practices in Malaysian early childhood education centers. We focused on three key areas: physical environment, human resource management, and health and safety. The qualitative method was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of personal experiences and contextual practices, helping us understand how educators and administrators make sense of their daily work. Recent phenomenological research, such as Frearson and Duncan (2024), demonstrates how in-depth interviews can capture educators' lived experiences and provide rich insights into the implementation of human-centered practices in educational settings, supporting the relevance of this methodological approach.

Two participants were selected from large early childhood education centers in Kuala Lumpur. One is a senior teacher with 10 years of experience, and the other is a kindergarten manager with 7 years in leadership roles. Both work in institutions that have several branches, indicating substantial experience in larger organizational settings.

The interviews were semi-structured, covering the three main themes mentioned above. This format allowed us to explore emerging topics during conversations, such as how cultural needs influence classroom design or institutional support for teacher well-being. Sample questions included: "How does your institution prioritize child-centered design?" and "What humanistic policies support teacher professional growth?"

We conducted face-to-face interviews lasting approximately one hour each. Before beginning, participants received full briefings about the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, response confidentiality, and the strictly academic use of data. Interview guides were shared beforehand, and with participants' consent, all conversations were audio-recorded for transcription and analysis.

We transcribed all audio recordings word-for-word, producing about 7 pages of text. The transcripts were carefully checked for accuracy and then reviewed by participants to ensure our interpretations matched their intended meanings.

For analysis, we used manual coding. After reading through the transcripts several times, we identified meaningful segments related to our three research areas. These initial codes were then grouped into patterns and organized into three main themes: physical environment, human resource management, and health and safety.

We used member checking as our main way to ensure trustworthiness, following Adler's (2022) recommendations. Since this is exploratory qualitative research, we aimed for depth of understanding rather than broad generalization. Although our sample size was small, having both teaching and management perspectives gave us valuable complementary insights into humanistic management practices in Malaysian early childhood education.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section will focus on the three core themes of physical environment, human resource management, and health and safety, and present and discuss the findings in detail from the perspective of teachers and managers (simulation). The content will be closely combined with the interview data of Natalie, supplemented by relevant literature and theory analysis, aiming to reveal the practices, challenges and future development directions of humanized management in kindergartens in Malaysia.

3.1. Physical Environment

The study found that Malaysian kindergartens provide child-friendly facilities, such as low washbasins that support children's autonomy in hygiene routines. However, free exploration areas were limited, and safety measures were inconsistently implemented, reflecting a gap between current design and children's developmental needs.

3.2 Teacher's Perspective: Child-Friendliness and User Experience of Space Design

Teachers observed that the child-scale facilities, like small washbasins, enhance children's confidence and independence. However, quiet corners were rarely used, and no free exploration areas were available, particularly for children with special needs. Teachers suggested adding more washbasins near classrooms to reduce walking distance and prevent accidents, indicating that environmental design should consider both child convenience and teacher workload.

3.3 Manager's Perspective: Overall Environmental Planning Concept and Future Improvement Direction

Managers emphasized holistic planning guided by educational values, balancing children's developmental needs and safety requirements. Future improvements include expanding exploratory spaces (e.g., discovery corners, natural observation areas), integrating multicultural elements, adopting sustainable materials, and designing flexible spaces with movable partitions. These strategies reflect the Reggio Emilia concept of the environment as the "third teacher" and highlight how humanized environmental planning can enhance children's learning and wellbeing.

These findings align with Meng and Zhang (2025), who argue that the environment shapes children's abilities, and contrast with Murungi et al. (2021), who stress the importance of structured safety programs. Similarly, Makeleni and Ndu (2025) emphasize that a safe, flexible, and inclusive learning environment is crucial for supporting children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, highlighting the ongoing relevance of environmental design in early childhood education. The limited exploration areas and uneven safety practices may result from space and resource constraints, staff training gaps, and children's preference for group activities. Practically, administrators should consider flexible, culturally inclusive, and safe designs that promote both autonomy and engagement.

3.4 Human Resource Management

The study found that Malaysian kindergartens face several challenges in managing and supporting their teaching staff. Teachers reported that training opportunities are limited, often focusing mainly on basic first aid, while broader areas such as teaching strategies, child psychology, and curriculum development are rarely addressed. Staff input in decision-making exists through meetings and consultations, but career advancement is unclear, and salaries are relatively low. These factors affect teacher motivation, professional identity, and long-term retention (Xia et al., 2024; Zheng, 2023). Similarly, Safrizal and Yulia (2025) highlight that in dynamic teaching environments, proactive encouragement strategies and emotional support are crucial for maintaining teachers' professional engagement and wellbeing, underscoring the need for comprehensive support systems in early childhood education.

3.5 Teacher's Perspective: Career Development, Emotional Support and Work Atmosphere Experience

Teacher A highlighted that although some training and opportunities for input are provided, the narrow scope and infrequency of professional development limit growth. She noted that while the work atmosphere is relatively stable due to low staff mobility, low salaries and unclear promotion pathways remain significant concerns: "Malaysian preschool teachers have low salaries and bottlenecks in their career development. If they are not promoted to management positions or open kindergartens on their own, they may still be ordinary teachers in ten years." Teacher A also emphasized the emotional pressures of the high-intensity work environment. Although managers make efforts to provide emotional support and resolve conflicts, the demands of teaching and parent communication continue to create stress. Staff meetings and collaborative decision-making help teachers feel valued and connected to outcomes, but limited professional development and unclear career pathways remain challenges that affect long-term retention and job satisfaction.

3.6 Managers' Perspective: Building a People-Oriented Teacher Team Management System

Managers emphasized that a people-oriented teacher management system integrates recruitment, professional development, and cultural construction. Recruitment focuses not only on professional competence but also on humanistic qualities, selecting candidates who align with the values of the kindergarten. Open communication channels, collaborative decision-making, and teacher autonomy are promoted to enhance engagement and accountability. Professional development is structured to support both new and experienced teachers, emphasizing practical skills, curriculum innovation, and leadership growth. Recent research highlights that systemic, collaborative, and supportive professional development strengthens teacher agency, wellbeing, and sustained commitment in early childhood education (Karim et al., 2025). Incentives such as performance bonuses, innovation funds, recognition programs, and structured career paths help improve satisfaction and retention. Conflict management follows clear, structured processes, and attention is paid to emotional support and cultural inclusiveness, reflecting Malaysia's multicultural preschool context.

These findings are consistent with OECD (2021), who note that effective professional development promotes both practical competence and emotional support, and with Cholimah et al. (2025), who point out that understanding teachers' needs and challenges in supporting children's moral and social development is crucial for enhancing teacher wellbeing and the overall quality of early childhood education.

The limited training scope, low salaries, and unclear career pathways observed may result from resource constraints, management priorities, and systemic challenges. Building a humanized, people-centered teacher management system can enhance professional satisfaction, reduce burnout, and improve the overall quality of education in Malaysian kindergartens. This can be achieved by providing diverse and continuous professional development opportunities that address both practical skills and emotional support, fostering collaborative decision-making and teacher autonomy, clarifying career progression paths, implementing a combination of material and non-material incentives, and integrating conflict management and emotional wellbeing practices into daily work culture. Promoting cross-cultural collaboration among teachers strengthens team cohesion and ensures inclusiveness in the multicultural context. Collectively, these

strategies contribute to a sustainable, humanized management system that supports teachers' professional growth and wellbeing while improving educational outcomes for children.

3.7 Health and Safety

Ensuring the physical and mental health and safety of children in kindergartens is a top priority and a fundamental aspect of humane management. A secure and healthy environment allows children to explore and learn with confidence, reassures parents, and enables teachers to focus more effectively on education. To support this, kindergartens must establish a comprehensive and enforceable health and safety management system, while also paying continuous attention to the mental well-being of both children and teachers. According to the World Health Organization, health encompasses not only physical well-being but also mental and social aspects, and is a process that enables individuals to function fully in society (Şenol & Şenol, 2023). Therefore, humane management should emphasize the importance of promoting psychological and social health for both children and educators.

3.8 Teachers' Perspective: Daily Protection of Children's Physical and Mental Safety and Emergency Response

Teacher A mentioned that critical role of frontline teachers in monitoring and ensuring children's physical and mental safety. Daily responsibilities include checking for wounds and bruises, recording observations, and communicating with parents, yet the absence of standardized morning health checks limits the systematic monitoring of children's physical and emotional states. During teaching activities, the "learn to play" model aligns with children's learning preferences but increases the demands on teachers to anticipate and prevent safety risks, such as collisions or improper use of materials. Managing aggressive behaviors requires both immediate safety measures and attention to underlying emotional needs, with strategies that combine containment with guidance and emotional support. Teacher A also noted that parent communication can be a source of stress, as explaining incidents in detail is necessary to maintain trust. Effective home-school communication and shared safety responsibilities are therefore essential to alleviate teacher pressure and ensure comprehensive protection. In addition, teachers must be equipped to manage accidental injuries, infectious disease prevention, and children's emotional wellbeing through observation, counseling, and role-playing activities to help children understand and regulate their emotions.

3.9 Manager's Perspective: System Design, Risk Prevention and Mental Health Support

From the manager's perspective, building a humane health and safety management system requires systematic planning and multi-dimensional integration. Manager B described the implementation of a "Kindergarten Safety Management Manual" covering health care, disease prevention, inspections, and dynamic risk monitoring. Measures such as correcting aging facilities, dual-track meal management for nutrition and preferences, and documenting allergies reflect careful attention to children's physical safety, while psychological safety is supported through coordinated strategies involving environment, teachers, and families. Teacher emotion recognition training, individualized plans for children with special needs, and optimization of teachers' work schedules contribute to overall wellbeing. These practices demonstrate the importance of combining humanization with institutionalization, standardizing procedures while adapting to

children's experiences and teachers' needs, aligning closely with the "best interests of the child" principle in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child.

However, challenges remain. Personalized programs for children with special needs depend on external expertise, posing sustainability risks. Teacher training tends to focus on skill-based competencies rather than the theoretical foundations of psychological support. These findings indicate that future development should focus on strengthening the theoretical and practical integration of mental health support, enhancing teachers' ability to respond proactively, and ensuring sustainability of individualized programs. Establishing a humanized, systematized approach to health and safety can improve both children's and teachers' wellbeing, reinforce trust with parents, and create a supportive environment that fosters safe, confident, and holistic learning experiences.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored human-centered management in Malaysian kindergartens through interviews with a senior teacher and a manager in Kuala Lumpur. The findings suggest that preschools have made efforts to create child-friendly environments, such as installing age-appropriate facilities and involving teachers in decision-making. However, challenges remain, including limited exploration spaces, training programs focused mainly on first aid, low salaries, unclear career pathways, and inconsistent safety practices. Mental health support for both teachers and children was also found to be limited.

Overall, while kindergartens show commitment to children's needs and teacher participation, there is still a need for more systematic and sustainable approaches. Strengthening teacher development, improving working conditions, and establishing reliable safety protocols are essential steps toward building preschool environments that truly support the well-being of both educators and young learners in Malaysia.

The findings of this study highlight several important implications for preschool management in Malaysia. Creating environments that are inclusive and developmentally appropriate for children of different ages is essential. At the same time, teacher training needs to move beyond first aid and cover broader areas such as pedagogy, child psychology, and curriculum development. Clearer career pathways and fairer compensation are also needed to support teacher motivation and retention.

Equally important are efforts to strengthen collaboration between teachers and parents, with regular opportunities for communication and shared activities. Managers should also place greater emphasis on teachers' well-being by addressing workload and providing emotional support. Finally, safety practices should be more consistent, with regular emergency drills and age-sensitive risk assessments. These measures can help build safer, more professional, and more supportive preschool environments that benefit both children and educators.

This study has several limitations. It was based on only two participants from Kuala Lumpur, so the findings may not fully represent practices in other regions or different types of kindergartens. In addition, the use of semi-structured interviews provided rich qualitative insights but limited generalizability. Time constraints also meant that not all aspects of human-centered management could be examined in depth.

Future research should involve a larger and more diverse group of participants, and it would be useful to combine interviews with classroom observations or surveys to provide a broader perspective. For practitioners, kindergartens should ensure that facilities match the developmental needs of children, expand teacher training programs, and establish clearer

career development pathways. Consistent emergency drills and stronger parent–teacher collaboration are also recommended to enhance both safety and educational quality.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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