

Leadership and management in early childhood: navigating contradictions and pedagogical practices to foster inclusivity

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Sep 30, 2024

Revised Jun 21, 2025

Accepted Jul 6, 2025

Keywords:

Early childhood education

Environment

Leadership

Management practices

Pedagogical praxis

ABSTRACT

Early years' education is an important foundation for a child's life-long learning, and leaders and managers in early childhood work settings have an important role in creating a nurturing environment that supports and enables children to learn regardless of their needs. This study investigates the challenges and contradictions leaders and managers face in early childhood education (ECE) settings. It examines how pedagogical praxis can be leveraged to foster inclusivity focusing on the tension between the intrinsic value of play and the pressure of child performativity meeting performance benchmarks. This qualitative study offers a constructive discussion on leadership practices in ECE and inclusion in Malaysia. The thematic analysis of nine interviews analyzed by N-VIVO software and showed the important considerations for enhancing leadership and management approaches, creating more inclusive spaces, and supporting the holistic development of early childhood curricula. The result offers a rich description of how leading practices are increasingly influenced by dominant trends in educational policies and society, including neoliberal agendas and narrowly conceived accountability systems that focus on measurable outcomes. It underlines the centrality of supporting the ongoing professional development of educators.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Given the caring and delicate nature of the field of early years education, leadership and management are pivotal in the creation and maintenance of inclusive and high-quality learning environments. These areas are profoundly influenced by prevailing educational ideologies that determine what is seen as the most relevant set of priorities and pedagogical approaches [1]. One of the key tensions within early childhood settings deals with the value attributed to the intrinsically playful nature of children's learning, compared with the growing pressure for performativity and results [2]. This tension is deeply rooted within wider educational and societal developments that emphasize the importance of academic results over children's holistic development even though early years education is becoming an ever more important foundational pillar of lifelong learning and development [3], a disheartening gap between the ideals of educational policies and the realities inside the walls of early years settings which continues to widen [4]. This study explores how leaders and managers in early childhood education (ECE) reconcile these contradictions, with specific attention to the practices that make for inclusive and pedagogically sound learning environments in Malaysia.

Leadership in early childhood goes beyond administrative duties. It involves inspiring, motivating and empowering educators, staff and families alike to partner with them to reach a shared vision for the setting. Strong leadership in ECE is represented by individuals who understand child development, advocate for best practices, and lead others within an environment for continuous learning and growth [5]. Leaders in these sites are continually trying to reconcile the often-competing needs of children, educators and the community in an environment that is governed by regulatory and policy frameworks. Neoliberal policies focused on accountability, standardization and performance metrics can be in direct tension with child-centered pedagogies that are characterized by play, exploration and social-emotional learning [6]. In this way, educational leaders are called upon to navigate competing demands while also seeking ways to limit exclusionary practices [7]. According to Sisson *et al.* [8], engaging leadership and management that create a positive learning environment and provide high-quality educational experiences are associated with improved developmental outcomes for children. Previous studies [9], [10] demonstrated that pedagogical contradictions became more acute when research revealed that the quality of early years education directly influences lifelong learning and developmental trajectories.

In the light of that, early childhood development includes, promotes and champions inclusive education as an entitlement and as a fundamental right. It became a politically popular term within public policy and practice. There has been a surge of interest in this concept, and it has also become a focus of educational research. Effective inclusion depends on the application of inclusive values and principles in early childhood practice but to do this most effectively there are gaps between theory and practice, this is compounded by insufficient resources and training, and by the impact of social and cultural prejudices [11]. Kong [12] highlighted that in Malaysian contexts where educational policy often lags behind pedagogical innovation. Thus, it is possible to close that gap by showing how policies can better engage with ground-level educational practices. Specifically, this study explores what tensions and challenges leaders and managers face in ECE settings in implementing play-based pedagogies. The study also examines how leaders and managers negotiate the tensions and what it means for their educational practices. It also examines how these professionals put inclusive practices into action. Thus, the research questions (RQs) of the study are:

- RQ1: How do ECE leaders and managers balance scholarly policy mandates with play-based learning?
- RQ2: How do ECE leaders and managers implement inclusion when they are following performance-based learning?
- RQ3: What are ECE leaders' efforts to incorporate cultural competence in leadership and teaching to promote inclusivity in diverse Malaysian schools?
- RQ4: How do ECE managers work to integrate the demands of social and educational policy with child-centered development?

In addition, the research objectives (ROs) of the study are formulated as:

- RO1: to understand how ECE leaders balance play with pedagogical imperatives of academic competence.
- RO2: to determine the challenges specific to ECE leaders in designing inclusive learning spaces under strict policy models.
- RO3: to understand how ECE managers implement cultural responsiveness and inclusion in ECE in Malaysia.
- RO4: to discuss how ECE leaders negotiate between policy requirements and children's whole development needs in early education.

2. RELATED STUDIES

In the rapidly changing environment of early years education, it is crucial to pay attention to major trends in education and society, since they are deeply influencing the leadership and management practices in early years settings, these trends have direct implications on the way current policies and practices of inclusivity are shaped, and how the priorities of early years leaders and managers are influenced by societal expectations, by paying attention to these shifts, we can better understand how to address the current challenges in early years pedagogy to ensure the effectiveness of ECE. Kinzel [13] discussed the crucial contribution of indigenous knowledge to ECE to build reconciliation in our nest. This study critically shows the importance of diverse perspectives and cultural practices to enhance leadership and management practices in early childhood settings. Rahmatullah *et al.* [14] viewed the importance of local community participation in Malaysian early childhood care and education centers. The study highlighted the role of community participation in shaping leadership and management practices in early childhood settings. By involving the local community, children can feel much more comfortable enrolling in an early childhood center as they already know some familiar faces around them and this will enable them to integrate well in the new environment. Cooper and McKee [15] studied the management, leadership, and governance of ECE

in Canada their study showed the diverse approaches and practices in leadership and management in ECE across different countries. It also showed that there are no one-size-fits-all strategies that can apply to all educational contexts and a need for context-specific leadership in this sector to be fostered and shaped. Besides discussed the role of a supervisor in shaping the leadership model of middle-level managers working in ECE, the study emphasizes the need for a job definition and leadership expectations to be established by supervisors in ECE to shape effective leadership practices [16]. Research by Ali [17] is an interesting study that discussed innovative leadership management in ECE by aiming to describe patterns of innovative leadership in this context. His result emphasizes the need to introduce innovative approaches to leadership and management in ECE to adapt in the evolving landscape of education and the changing needs of children.

Distributed leadership structures in ECE (focusing on co-creative approaches), but their work is not very specific to Malaysia's culture and policy context [18]. So does Stamopoulos [19], who call for the use of adaptive leadership in pre-school, but who does not even take the time to explore what is at stake here, in Malaysia, in play-based learning versus academic performance measures. Empirically describe the leadership behavior of ECE, by drawing on management practices, without going into the cultural and policy context of Malaysia [20]. Siraj-Blatchford and Manni [20] provided theoretical information but does not account for the specific policy constraints and cultural norms that guide the actions of Malaysian ECE leaders. Research by Muijs *et al.* [21] evaluated leadership studies in early childhood and note areas for development that have not yet been addressed, without focus on the particular challenges of incorporating play within performance-based pedagogy in Malaysia. Research by Rodd [22] provided a synthesis of early childhood leadership theories and practices, which is a good reference book but does not address Malaysia specifically nor how cultural norms and educational policy impact ECE leadership. Heikka and Hujala [23] were empirical researchers on distributed leadership, which offer a richer view of leadership processes without exploring the Malaysian ECE leaders' response to play-based learning and school performance demands. Colmer *et al.* [24] consider professional learning leadership in early childhood settings but report on professional development without talking to Malaysian ECE leaders on policy and culture challenges. Research by Sims *et al.* [25] explored the ideas about early childhood leadership and the impact on professionalism-interesting reading, but it was not an account of Malaysian education or the unique tensions between play-based pedagogy and university policies. Lastly, research by Waniganayake *et al.* [26] explored the topic of leadership in ECE but are merely broad in scope, and do not address Malaysia's particular cultural and policy environment which is the focus of this paper. On the other hand, this paper will attempt to close this void with the Malaysian scenario, giving a fresh look into the ways ECE leaders address these particular issues.

Furthermore, leadership is an enabler in navigating contradictions and pedagogical practices to promote inclusivity. In this particular study, Kirby *et al.* [27] was developing a new measure of ECE leadership to support quality improvements. The study highlights the importance of leadership in the ECE. Study by Ball [6] noted that neoliberal pressures toward, for instance, quantifiable measures of literacy and numeracy marginalize key developmental aspects, such as emotional and social development. An emphasis on marketized approaches to education and economic performance measures over the 'central tenets of education' can lead to a marginalization of play, which has a significant role to play in children's overall development. On a different note, Vygotskian theories emphasize the importance of play in the cognitive, social and emotional development of children, and it is suggested that this is supported by a growing consensus that play is important as it helps children develop the vital language and problem-solving skills they need [28]. Having examined the complex interplay among leadership, management, contradictions, and pedagogical practices in ECE, this review establishes a foundation for filling particular deficiencies by formulating targeted research enquiries that seek to further understand how these factors interact to influence educational outcomes and inclusiveness in educational environments. Hence, the main objective of this study explores what tensions and challenges leaders and managers face in ECE settings in implementing play-based pedagogies.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

The study employs a qualitative research design to understand the experiences and perceptions of early years leaders and managers. Qualitative research is most useful for exploring rich, complex phenomena that are deeply context-bound as is the case here, with an exploration of the interactions between leadership, pedagogical praxis and inclusivity in ECE [29]. The emphasis on qualitative methods enables the researchers to delve into the details of leadership and management practices and the complexity of pedagogical issues that leaders and managers face in becoming more inclusive. This study takes place in a variety of early years education settings in Malaysia, allowing for a nuanced exploration of challenges and strategies that are reflective of the diverse educational landscape outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 [30].

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants consisted of nine purposively sampled early years leaders, educators and policymakers. Data were encoded and classified into themes with

N-VIVO 14 software. Consequently, the interviews resulted in the development of coding frameworks that encompassed conceptual elements elucidating the perspectives and experiences of early years leaders in Malaysia. Subcategories were subsequently added to enhance the investigation for rigorous and dependable findings. Thematic identifies emerging patterns in the data, about how leadership and management practices support (or do not support) inclusivity and how they navigate pedagogical contradictions. Thematic analysis will be done concerning the analytical literature and the data will be analyzed with trustworthiness through N-VIVO software to ensure the highest standards in qualitative work, including the use of triangulation of data, member checking and peer review.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study's findings are organized around the themes of changes in educational and societal policy that influence leadership practice; the tensions of play and performativity; and the contradictions between those policy expectations and the realities of classroom life. These themes are informed by background factors in the participants both as individuals and their experience as followers—as well as the analysis between cases that shows how macro-level influences feed into decisions and strategies and how policy-practice tensions are managed. The study then offers practical suggestions about how to create more inclusive and holistic ECE environments and provides a rich account that highlights the dilemmas and complexities of leadership and management in the early years.

The question for this study was: How do early years leaders and managers manage tensions between academic policy and intrinsically playful value approaches to pedagogy that promote responsive education, inclusivity, and holistic development in ECE settings? Table 1 shows the summary of the interviews in which the early years educational leaders talked about policies balancing academic and play-based learning with the need for their settings to be responsive, inclusive, and holistically developmentally informed.

Table 1. Themes, codes, and supporting excerpts from the transcript

Themes	Codes	Excerpts
Integrated curriculum design	Balancing academics and play, extended learning hours, curriculum adaptation	<i>“The shift towards early academic achievement has influenced my approach. We have had to adapt our curriculum to incorporate more structured learning activities.”</i>
Inclusivity and cultural responsiveness	Inclusivity efforts, cultural sensitivity in curriculum	<i>“Societal expectations, particularly those from parents and policymakers, push us to enhance our inclusivity practices. This has led us to incorporate diverse teaching strategies and resources to better support children from different backgrounds and with various learning needs.”</i>
Flexible educational policies	Flexible policy application	<i>“Find that there is a disparity between the structured outcomes that policies emphasize and the flexible, individualized approaches needed in the classroom. Policies can sometimes be too rigid, whereas classroom practice needs to adapt to the unique need.”</i>
Advocacy and policy dialogue	Advocacy for policy change, stakeholder collaboration	<i>“We advocate for adjustments to policies when necessary to better fit the practical needs of our setting.”</i>
Professional development focus	Professional development in inclusivity	<i>“Seeking out additional support and training for our staff to meet these diverse needs effectively.”</i>

Figure 1 presents the voices of early years educators on the challenges of academic policy and the need for play-based approaches to holistic child development. The figure summarizes themes and codes distilled from interview thematic analyses that identify key obstacles and learning adaptations leaders use to keep academic requirements within inclusive targets. It summarizes the conversation of ECE leaders straddling policy requirements and child-centered practice, which helps frame the study's main conclusion in a more subtle light.

From the results of our interviews with nine early years leaders and managers, an account emerges of how they are negotiating the tensions between policy-driven academic directives and the intrinsic value of play in the pedagogy that informs their own early responsive, inclusive and holistic development-focused educational practices. These leaders are adapting curriculum to accommodate academic agendas alongside play-based learning, a strategy enacted to dampen the pernicious effects of early academic directives while safeguarding play's developmental value, and with theories of Vygotskian play that highlight play's significance in children's development of higher-level cognitive, social and emotional processes as a backdrop. This kind of balanced curriculum design is further supported by moves towards inclusive and culturally responsive programming, a practice that affirms specifically ethnic minority students' ways of being and knowing in the classroom, something that in turn echoes the findings from the aforementioned

earlier studies by Kinzel [13] and Stamopoulos [19] focusing on how diverse ways of thinking and doing in ECE settings can be advantageous for developing early childhood leadership and management.

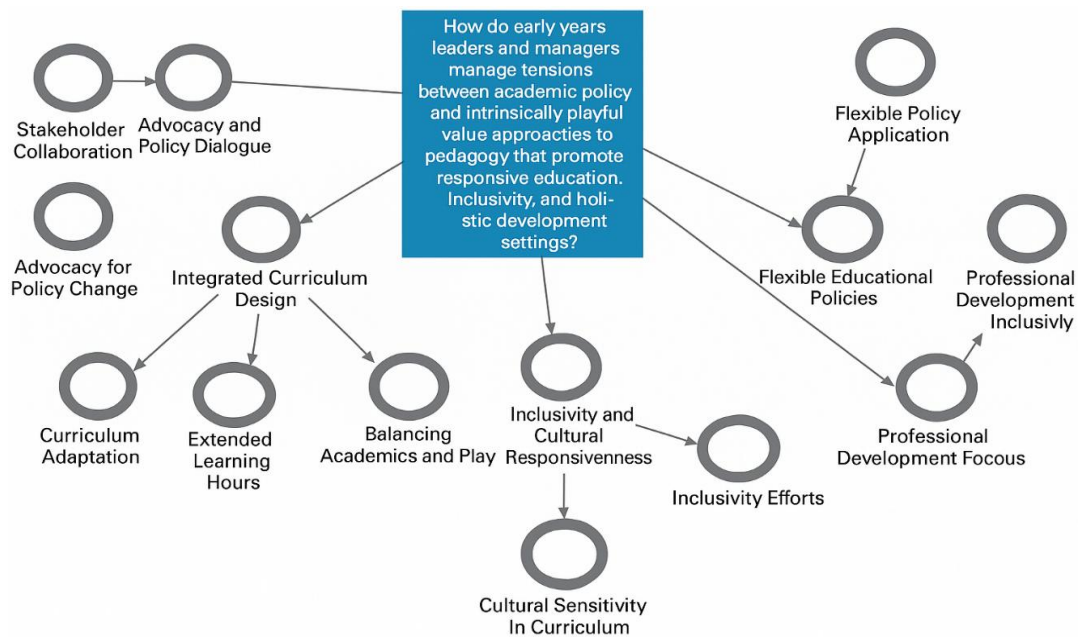


Figure 1. The perception of early years leaders on tensions between academic policy and intrinsically playful value approaches to pedagogy that promote responsive education, inclusivity, and holistic development

Additionally, the very flexibility of policy application endorsed by these leaders is consistent with the nature of adaptive educational policies that seek to provide educational practice with the autonomy and space to respond flexibly to the unique and shifting ecologies of early childhood. This flexibility, along with broader educational writings about divergent practice across nations, suggests the increased need for adaptive, place-based educational leadership able to respond to the challenge of new educational landscapes, which requires the development of dynamic leadership approaches. Furthermore, how advocacy mirrors practice, and how collaboration with key stakeholders is embraced, reflects the proactive approach necessary to bring policy to meet practical needs for example, what students need, and what teachers can provide the ability to make those difficult conversations to create environments in which quality can flourish that exemplifies good leadership practices. The result shows, as in the study by Rahmatullah *et al.* [14], the role of decentralized participatory governance at the community level in creating responsive and inclusive leadership practices in early childhood settings, and the reasons why localized measures of integration and inclusivity are needed. It also aligns with the research by Cooper and McKee [15] and Ali [17], which highlighted the value of diversity in leadership styles, and the need to invest in transformative, context-specific strategies, which are necessary to make sense of the new frontiers of early childhood development.

The result also shows that investing in ongoing professional development, especially in the area of inclusion demonstrates these leaders' commitment to leading teachers to develop skills in both meeting the needs of diverse learners and increasingly addressing the intersectionality and complexity of those needs. In reviewing the professional development activities, it is evident that these practices are supported by studies that explore leadership in educational quality in relation to targeted training and development. Together, these point to a sophisticated understanding of the tensions and challenges within early education (pedagogical, anthropological, social, emotional, developmental, and political) and to how these tensions can be negotiated through the leadership of individuals who demonstrate a deep understanding of policy limitations and educational ideals-in this case, inclusive, responsive and developmentally appropriate pedagogies. In taking this nuanced approach to managing the tensions that exist within education, the findings of this study are in harmony with the existing literature. A common theme in this literature is that, under neoliberal pressures, core developmental elements in ECE persist as often marginalized forces. As we have shown, a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of education policy and pedagogy, in turn, supports the importance of maintaining education's core elements through new and flexible approaches to leadership.

This study supports and advances the literature on ECE leadership, particularly the interplay between play-based learning and policy-driven scholarly expectations. Several studies [2], [3] emphasized the neoliberal shift toward testable educational performance that typically excludes developmental processes like play. Research by Stamopoulos [19] similarly calls attention to the developmental significance of play in early childhood and recommends policy interventions that promote a holistic approach. Research by Nicholson *et al.* [5] in Malaysia also looks at the role of education policies on inclusivity, this work digs a little deeper and addresses Malaysian ECE leaders' actual problems. In addition, Moshel and Berkovich [16] study on leadership implies fluid, context-dependent solutions, an observation that runs well with this paper's findings. Another research [3], [14] agrees with the notion that cultural factors affect educational leadership and inclusion work in multiracial settings. The results add to this evolving research collection in that they provide evidence about the way Malaysian ECE leaders manage these conflicts. They affirm calls made by Sisson *et al.* [8] for leadership practices that can meet the policy and pedagogical needs of ECE.

Finally, this research sheds light on the challenges facing ECE practitioners in Malaysia in reconciling play pedagogy with performance-based academic policy. Such results parallel much wider thinking on neoliberal practices in education, for example in a study by Ball [6] where policy-driven emphasis on outcomes is incompatible with whole-child practice. Yet our work is different in that we place these conflicts in the context of Malaysia's particular cultural and policy environment, with its expectations and limitations. This cultural complexity complicates the lives of ECE leaders, who must shift their practices in order to be inclusive and meet national performance expectations. This tension demands policy space that is more adaptive for play-based learning methods, taking their developmental merits into account [31]. The implications are concrete: Malaysian policymakers might be inclined to adopt adaptive regulations that place inclusivity and a fair share of early childhood development at the forefront. For all the lessons here, the work is bounded by the confines of this one country, and more future research might build upon these observations to probe similar issues in other cultural and policy environments. These factors might also provide a framework for adaptive leadership that will help drive a more inclusive, developmentally sensitive ECE environment.

4.1. Implication of the study

These findings point to important lessons for policymakers and ECE practitioners. First, the tension between the inherent virtue of play and the demands of academic rigor poses challenges to education policy that acknowledges the collective value of play-based learning in conjunction with curricular improvement. Essentially, what this research suggests is that, from policymaking levels down to practitioner-level knowledge, it is important to develop flexible educational policies and frameworks that balance developmental needs and academic rigor. Policies ought to be developed that promote playful environments where play is not set aside or undervalued but rather integrated in a complementary way with more structured and academic learning to optimize cognitive, social and emotional development. For practitioners, the findings stress the importance of professional learning throughout educators' careers so that they are knowledgeable and competent enough to work with different groups of students in our schools; and the emphasis on inclusive and culturally responsive education also emphasizes the need for pedagogies and practices that are flexible and responsive to the diverse learning needs of students in our multicultural society such as Malaysia.

In addition, continuous training and support in such areas provide educators with the necessary support and scaffolding to adopt more inclusive and culturally responsive educational practices to meet the evolving educational demands and changing sociocultural contexts. Ultimately, the research findings highlight the importance of developing a closer collaborative relationship between policymakers and practitioners to promote ECE settings as supportive, inclusive and appropriate learning environments for children. For future studies, expanding these analyses into a range of cultures would provide much needed information on the influence of different policy environments on ECE leadership practices. Longitudinal studies could also determine how adaptive leadership practices influenced children's social, emotional and academic development over time in play-based, inclusive environments.

4.2. Limitations of the study

This study illustrates some of the difficulties between policy-driven academic expectations and the psychological and developmental foundations of play in ECE settings in Malaysia, and the leadership practices to manage these tensions. The findings drew a picture of ECE leaders and managers balancing high academic expectations and their concerns for early years development, with emphases that fell within the aspects of educational policies to support child development holistically, inclusive and in culturally responsive ways. The recommendations included professional development and support for educators in the areas of inclusive educational practices and culturally knowing and engaging with children and families.

The need for a strong ECE programmed is paramount in a child's life, and ECE will forever remain the strongest foundation for lifelong learning, as child's rationale is deeply grounded and humanistic. It is therefore imperative that there exists a collaborative synergy between policymakers and practitioners to see this crucial stage in a child's life being given the best opportunities to learn, play, socialize, and thrive.

5. CONCLUSION

The study exposed the delicate tensions with which leaders and managers of ECE settings in Malaysia navigate between responding to benchmarks for academic achievement and valuing play for its own sake. Accommodating the curriculum with themed, academic activities that, nonetheless, remain embedded within a play-based curriculum, is part of a responsive strategy of making sense of the request to become part of a global sea of school-readiness discourse that values play for the development of young children while conversely responding to explicit directives for academic accountability. In this way, leaders implement adaptive strategies that value children's readiness for achieving academically while at the same time further promoting their holistic development-cognitive, social, and emotional. The interview analysis pointed to the leaders' adaptivity in fostering play-rich, child-centered environments. It draws upon Vygotskian theory and current research regarding the developmental benefits of play for young learners.

Moreover, great emphasis on inclusivity and cultural responsiveness in these ECEs, caught-up with societal demands and shifting policies. ECE leaders are adjusting their curricula to cater to diverse student backgrounds, which reflexively guides the teaching practice to be more inclusive and reflective of the Malaysian multicultural context. Reflexively, to promote flexible ECE policies, which suits the specific needs of different settings, is pursued and highlighted in the roles of ECE leaders to promote inclusivity. This empirical evidence shows how policy has impacted practice and vice versa. Lastly, they highlight the importance of continuous professional development, especially in the area of inclusivity, which has equipped these ECE educators with skills to ensure that, not only do ECE leaders comply with and follow but also lead educational innovations that both afford the pursuit of high academic standards and the wellbeing of every child.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The authors declare that no funding was received for this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

Name of Author	C	M	So	Va	Fo	I	R	D	O	E	Vi	Su	P	Fu
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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no competing interests related to this publication.

INFORMED CONSENT

Not applicable. No human participants were involved in this study that required informed consent.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Not applicable. This study did not involve human or animal subjects requiring ethical clearance.

DATA AVAILABILITY

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this published article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.




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