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Guided Play as Context for Teacher Practice: Exploring Young Children's Leadership Development in Macau

Winnie Sin Wai Pui¹, Yilin Tang², and Pui I Tang³

ABSTRACT

This study examines how guided play can serve as a meaningful context for developing leadership among young children, particularly those with special educational needs (SEN), in an inclusive kindergarten classroom in Macau. Existing leadership research has largely centred on adolescents and adults, positioning early childhood as merely preparatory, while research on young children's leadership often overlooks its relational and dynamic nature. This study examines how guided play supports young learners' developmental growth and experiences. Using participatory action research and grounded theory analysis, data were collected across two intervention cycles with one lead teacher and six child participants. Video recordings and teacher reflective diaries were analysed to identify patterns of children's leadership behaviours and supporting pedagogical conditions. Findings reveal guided play as an effective pedagogical approach for nurturing young children's leadership, notably for children with SEN. Four key teacher practice pillars emerged as critical to supporting children's leadership: cultivating an observational presence, preparing for responsive adaptation, approaching with affirming mindsets, and centering equity awareness. Researchers in this study also propose a TAP Model that may benefit future research on teachers' practices and the opportunities for children's agency in play.

KEYWORDS: Guided play; Young children's leadership; Inclusive education; Teacher practice; TAP model; Early childhood development; Macau; Six bricks

1 Professional and Continuing Education, University of Cambridge, UK

E-MAIL: winnie.pui@pace.cam.ac.uk ORCID: 0000-0002-2419-1759

2 Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, UK

E-MAIL: yt413@cam.ac.uk ORCID: 0009-0007-7943-3085

3 University of Saint Joseph Macao, China

E-MAIL: annietang713@hotmail.com

Introduction

Leadership development discourse has been predominantly oriented toward adolescent and adult populations, positioning early childhood as merely preparatory to future leadership capacity rather than as a period of authentic leadership development. This positioning has resulted in the limited provision of educational environments intentionally designed to support children's leadership development (Muijs et al., 2004). Through both explicit narratives and implicit institutional practices, children are frequently constructed as not yet capable of developing leadership competencies, thereby reproducing deficit-based narratives regarding children's present capacities. This framing overlooks empirical evidence of children's existing competencies while simultaneously disregarding their fundamental rights as active participants in society (Angelöw & Psouni 2025, Wallerstein et al., 2020).

Polish educator and children's rights advocate Janusz Korczak emphasised that children possess not merely rights to protection and provision but rights to participation and respect for their developing capacities (Korczak, 1929/2009). Korczak's insistence that children are "not people of tomorrow; they are people today" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, p. 30) fundamentally challenges deficit perspectives that defer recognition of children's competencies to some future date. Contemporary educational frameworks increasingly reflect this shift. The OECD's Future of Education and Skills 2030 emphasises that "student agency is not a personality trait; it is something malleable and learnable" (OECD, 2019, p. 34), recognising learners' individuality and the wider relationships with peers, families and communities. Children's development occurs within and through collaboration, not in isolation (Mawson, 2011). This relational understanding of agency aligns fundamentally with children's rights frameworks, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF UK, 1989), which recognises play as an existential right (Article 31). Play is therefore not peripheral but central to wellbeing, providing a context through which children exercise agency, build competencies, and participate in their social worlds, all of which form core foundations of leadership.

Contemporary classrooms and workplaces are becoming increasingly diverse and collaborative. This reflects what the OECD (2019) terms "co-agency", the recognition that learning and development occur through reciprocal collaboration. Developing agency is simultaneously a learning goal and a learning process. The knowledge, skills, attitudes and values acquired through ongoing experiences form the core foundations of competencies that do not emerge spontaneously in adulthood but are cultivated through early experiences through which children learn to take initiative and influence their peers. Early childhood represents a critical period for establishing

these foundational capacities, which constitute the essential ingredients for shaping children's future leadership capabilities. This is why play represents such a uniquely powerful context for nurturing leadership capacities (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). However, despite growing recognition of play's developmental importance, empirical research exploring children's leadership development within play settings remains limited (Chen, 2023).

This study investigates how guided play (Taylor & Boyer, 2020, Dennis & Stockall, 2015), whereby teachers provide initial guidelines for a task while preserving child autonomy, serves as a context for young children's leadership development, embodying the co-agency principle central to contemporary learning frameworks (OECD, 2019). This research is underpinned by a Participatory Action Research design; however, grounded theory methods were intentionally employed to guide the analytical process for two principal reasons: first, to avoid imposing adult defined leadership constructs that constrain recognition of children's diverse leadership expressions; and secondly, to systematically explore whether and how guided play contexts provide opportunities for teachers to support the development of the foundational capacities that constitute leadership in early childhood. This inductive approach ensures leadership conceptualisations emerge from children's observed behaviours rather than predetermined models, honouring varied expressions of agency, influence and social competence.

In Macau, current educational policy and curriculum guidelines reflect this play-based philosophy. According to the Education and Youth Development Bureau's Requirements of Basic Academic Attainments at Infant Education Level (Lok, 2015), young learners from K1 to K3 (equivalent to nursery, preschool, and reception levels in the UK) are expected to engage in educational experiences that enable them to learn through play and everyday activities, with learning occurring through active participation, hands-on exploration and social interaction within authentic contexts. This contemporary emphasis on play-based learning represents the culmination of significant policy evolution spanning more than two decades. By focusing on guided play, in an inclusive classroom, supporting children with special educational needs (SEN), this study also responds to Macau's educational priorities regarding both play based pedagogy and inclusive education, while also exploring the potential for developing young children's leadership capacities within play-based learning environments.

Importance of Leadership in Early Childhood

Leadership in early childhood matters not only because children will grow up to become adults, but because they have already been in the world. They are already

capable of making a unique, dynamic impacts. Traditional approaches to children's leadership have positioned children as "future citizens" whose voices will only matter once they become adults (Hart, 1992). However, this view assumes that children are not yet capable of leadership and are simply waiting to become. There is an established legacy within childhood studies that argues for a "beings rather than becomings" perspective (Uprichard, 2008), recognising children as present members of society who already hold capability, agency, and the right to exercise their leadership. For instance, in approaches such as Reggio Emilia, a child is seen as a citizen from birth, capable of expressing ideas through "a hundred languages", whether through drawings, gestures, or dialogue (Rinaldi, 2006).

Child leadership possesses distinctive characteristics that set it apart from adult leadership. It is often subtle and emerges in everyday "dynamic interactions with peers and adults", where young children gain social influence and, through these interactions, come to be recognised as leaders (Shin et al., 2004, p. 311). Their perceptions of leadership are relational, process-based, and often collaborative rather than hierarchical. They are shaped not only by personal traits but by social environments that allow children to make choices and be heard (Chen, 2023; Mukaromah, 2019). Furthermore, this recognition of children's leadership is also supported by educational theory. Dewey's theory of experiential learning (1916) emphasises that democracy is learned through shared experience, not as knowledge given in textbooks. Similarly, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights the importance of social interaction and collaborative learning in child development, underscoring how children develop agency and competence through participation in meaningful social contexts. Similarly, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF UK, 1989), which grew most directly from the work of Korczak (1929/2009), emphasises children's right to participation; therefore, seeing leadership in young children, as both educationally meaningful and ethically necessary.

Developing Leadership Skills in a Play Setting

Leadership scholarship has long focused on individual skills; however, the study of leadership skillsets, especially in early childhood contexts, has received less attention. Skills have been the fundamental building blocks of leadership. These are discrete, learnable and observable competencies that individuals can practice and acquire (Northouse, 2025; Popper & Mayseless, 2007). Early research distinguished between creative problem solving, social judgement skills, and knowledge as components of leader effectiveness (Mumford et al., 2000), and subsequent work has expanded this into expertise and experience, knowledge, memory and deductive reasoning, defined

as core competencies (Boyatzis, 2008). In this sense, skills refer to individual competencies that can be isolated, assessed and taught.

Leadership skillsets highlight a more dynamic integration and orchestration of multiple skills in action. That is, how skills are combined, sequenced and adapted to meet real-time social demands (Dinh et al., 2014). Rather than a separate, checklist of abilities, a skillset is a pattern of coordinated behaviours. For instance, in an early childhood context, a leadership skillset may appear when a child notices a problem during group play, invites peers to share ideas, negotiates roles, offers encouragement, and then helps the group return to the task. Here, skills such as perspective-taking, emotional regulation, turn-taking and problem-solving do not occur in isolation, they are integrated and enacted together in a meaningful sequence. As Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) argue, leadership is “typically treated as a slogan rather than a precise model of leadership that would lend itself to empirical inquiry” (p. 202), and it is transformational instead of the product of single skills. Thus, this paper understands skills as basic components, whereas skillsets are viewed as dynamic processes through which these skills are systematically integrated and enacted, effectively shaping leadership.

Despite increasing attention to leadership development, much existing research still focuses on isolated skills rather than the integrated and situated skillsets that shape outcomes together (Hackman & Wageman, 2007; Karagianni & Jude Montgomery, 2017). In early childhood settings, emerging work shows that young children’s leadership arises through the dynamic interaction of skills during real-time social events. Heikka and Waniganayake (2011) demonstrate that skills such as “allocating tasks, proposing and justifying solutions, seeking consensus” become meaningful only through repeated participation in group activities gradually forming flexible and recognisable leadership skillsets (Sun et al., 2017). Following this skills-together perspective, this study views early childhood leadership as the socially situated integration of multiple skills rather than the result of any single competence.

Recent scholarship further highlights the significance of developing leadership skills in a play setting. Studies show that preschool children can learn and refine a leadership skillset, such as directing peers, negotiating rules, or coordinating collective action through ongoing participation in play episodes (Chen & Kacerek, 2021; Fu, 1977). Play also supports the construction of cultural identities, empathy, and shared decision-making (Pui et al., 2020), and encourages collaboration, task negotiation, and collective goal setting that mirror early leadership processes (Vogt et al., 2020). Through these process-oriented interactions, individual skills such as turn-taking, perspective-taking, emotional regulation, and organising group tasks become progressively woven into coherent leadership skillsets.

Learning through Play Context in Macau

Early childhood represents a critical developmental period during which young children actively explore their environment and construct their sense of self. Early childhood education programmes aim to support learning and holistic development across physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, and moral domains (Chen, 2023; Pui et al., 2020). This recognition of play as the foundational curriculum of the kindergarten established a pedagogical principle that continues to influence early childhood education systems globally, including contemporary policy developments in Macau. As noted earlier in the introduction, Macau's early childhood policies position play as the central vehicle for learning, with curriculum expectations emphasising hands-on, participatory, and socially grounded experiences for children from K1 to K3.

Macau's early childhood education system has evolved through three distinct legislative reforms (Table 1), each reflecting fundamental shifts in pedagogical philosophy and educational priorities. The First Reform in 1991 (Lok, 2015) positioned kindergartens primarily as extensions of family support services, with a strong emphasis on developmental surveillance and remediation. While establishing foundational principles and promoting the importance of early education, this reform focused on developing assessment frameworks and support structures to ensure early years children received appropriate educational guidance.

The Second Reform in 2006 (Lok, 2015) marked a transitional shift toward more child-centered principles, introducing holistic developmental objectives such as nurturing children's learning interests and creativity and developing their multifaceted potential. However, the reform remained largely silent on specific pedagogical approaches, leaving implementation methods implicit rather than explicitly articulated. The Third Reform in 2014 (Lok, 2015) represents a paradigmatic transformation in early childhood education policy. This reform explicitly recognises children as active constructors of their own knowledge rather than passive recipients of instruction. The framework emphasises responding to children's developmental patterns and learning characteristics, honouring individual differences and drawing on their natural curiosity and life experiences. All principles that align with contemporary research on play-based pedagogies and developmentally appropriate practice (Hadani & Vey, 2021; Pui et al., 2020; Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

Over a decade has passed since Macau's Third Reform in 2014 mandated play as the primary learning activity, yet empirical research examining how play-based approaches support children in Macau contexts remains limited. Given Macau's growing emphasis on inclusive education (Ng & Kwan, 2020), understanding how play-based pedagogy functions in classrooms supporting children with SEN represents a critical

research need. This study investigates guided social play in an inclusive classroom, examining leadership emergence among children with SEN and the teacher practices that support both inclusion and leadership cultivation.

Table 1. The Three Stages of Reform in Macau's Early Childhood Education System

Category	First Reform	Second Reform	Third Reform
Legal Framework	Decree-Law No. 11/91/M, Article 5, Paragraph 2 — Regulations on the Non-Tertiary Education System	Law No. 9/2006, Article 7, Paragraph 1 — Organic Law on the Non-Tertiary Education System	Administrative Regulation No. 15/2014, Article 4, Paragraph 2 — Framework for the Local Formal Education Curriculum
Educational Objectives for Early Childhood Education	a) Assist families in educating their children. b) Promote children's physical, intellectual, and emotional development. c) Develop proficiency in the mother tongue, particularly in comprehension and oral expression. d) Develop children's ethical concepts, values, and interests. e) Cultivate habits of independence and cooperation. f) Provide children with experiences that help them adapt to daily life. g) Monitor signs of maladjustment, developmental delay, or disabilities, and provide appropriate support.	a) Cultivate basic ethical concepts and moral conduct in young children. b) Foster social skills and cooperation. c) Foster hygienic habits and promote physical and mental health. d) Encourage learning interest and creativity to develop potential. e) Enrich daily experiences and enhance language and communication skills. f) Cultivate artistic appreciation and environmental awareness.	a) Provide comprehensive, foundational education for young children. b) Align curriculum with developmental characteristics and learning needs. c) Address individual differences in physical, cognitive, and socio-cultural development. d) Integrate curriculum content to strengthen holistic learning. e) Encourage curiosity and life experience to foster active learning. f) Use play as the primary learning approach. g) Integrate environmental protection into educational practice.

Source: adapted from Lok (2015)

Research Design

Due to the scope of this article, only one theme emerging from the broader action research project is reported here: the exploration of leadership experiences within guided play. This study employed a participatory action research design (Elliott, 1991; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011) to explore how guided social play may enable teachers to support young children's expressions and experiences of leadership development in a formal school setting in Macau. An interpretivist approach was adopted as it recognises the subjective and socially constructed nature of learning experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Erickson, 2012). This perspective was particularly valuable for this study,

which sought to create play settings where children might experience and enact leadership in their own ways, and to use those play experiences to reflect more broadly on how leadership can be understood in early childhood education. Rather than measuring leadership against predetermined criteria, the study inductively explored moments when children exhibited behaviours such as exercising autonomy, making decisions, or influencing peers, allowing leadership conceptualisations to emerge from the data itself. This supported a rethinking of how leadership manifests among young children.

The Six Bricks method is based on a holistic developmental concept and focuses on five key learning areas: cognitive, creative, emotional, physical, and social interaction. Through engaging in the Six Bricks activities, children develop five core characteristics: thinking, creativity, emotional regulation, focus, and social cooperation (Zosh et al., 2022). The Six Bricks method (Jemutai, 2017; Brey, 2017) is used as a simple play approach that encourages collaboration, creativity and problem solving through guided social play. Its simplicity, using only six LEGO DUPLO bricks, was intentionally chosen to illustrate how meaningful play opportunities can be created even with minimal resources when supported by intentional teacher facilitation.

Sampling, Data Collection and Data Analysis

The research involved one lead teacher and six child participants aged four to five years with special educational needs (SEN). The focus on children with SEN reflects the central aim of the broader project, which was to understand how play-based learning can provide opportunities for students with diverse learning needs to participate, collaborate and potentially experience aspects of leadership within inclusive learning environments.

This study was conducted in a K2 class at a kindergarten in Macau, comprising 28 children aged four to five years. Six children with special educational needs were the target participants. The class exhibited considerable individual differences in developmental levels, with some children demonstrating attention difficulties and others showing limited social interaction and communication. The aim of the study was not to generate generalisable findings but to explore, in depth, how guided play might support the developmental learning of young learners with SEN. These six students were identified through the school's assessment process as those requiring additional support, making them the most appropriate focus for this exploratory work.

Table 2 presents an overview of the young learners' current capabilities at the beginning of the action research, across five developmental skill areas, as identified through their formative and summative assessment reports from the previous school

year in a school in Macau. The focus on these six skills reflects the aim of this study, which is to explore how play can support young learners with low learning motivation and limited interpersonal skills. The ratings (Low, Medium, High) were adapted from the original school assessments.

Table 2. Overview of Young Learners' Backgrounds

Participant	Age	Language Ability	Social Skills	Learning Motivation	Cognitive Ability	Attention	Memorisation	Official Diagnosis
Child A	4.5 years old	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	Not yet diagnosed.
Child B	5 years old	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	Autism Global Delay - Cognitive, language and motor.
Child C	5 years old	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	Not yet diagnosed
Child D	4.5 years old	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Developmental Delay - Language
Child E	4.5 years old	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	Low	High	Not yet diagnosed.
Child F	5.5 years old	High	Low	High	Medium	High	High	Not yet diagnosed.

The lead teacher-researcher was a female educator with around four years of teaching experience and was the class teacher for the participating students. She held qualifications in business administration, early childhood education, and inclusive education. Her training in inclusive education strengthened her ability to recognise and support diverse expressions of leadership among children with special educational needs while carrying out her dual role as practitioner and researcher.

The research was conducted across two intervention cycles, each consisting of nine 35-minute lessons. This iterative design enabled reflection and refinement between cycles, consistent with the action research principles of plan, act, observe, and reflect (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2013). The 18 lesson topics implemented across the two action research cycles, illustrating how the Six Bricks activities were integrated into different subject learning areas.

Data collection involved two methods: video recordings of all 18 lessons to document naturally occurring child-to-child and teacher-to-child interactions, including peer interactions and the emergence of leadership; and teacher diaries kept by the lead teacher to capture reflections on practice and pedagogical decision-making.

Data were analysed using a Grounded Theory Approach (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), allowing patterns of leadership behaviours and facilitative teacher practices to emerge inductively. The credibility of findings was strengthened through triangulation of multiple data sources and prolonged engagement across the two cycles. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Saint Joseph in Macau and informed consent was obtained from the participating school.

Findings and Discussion

This study explored the potential of guided play contexts to support young children's leadership development. Four dimensions of teacher role preparation emerged as potentially significant in creating conditions where leadership expressions could develop: (1) cultivating observational presence, (2) preparing for responsive adaptation, (3) approaching with affirming mindsets, and (4) centering equity awareness. The following sections present each theme with supporting evidence from classroom observations and teacher diaries.

Theme 1 Cultivating Observational Presence

The extract 01 illustrates how the teacher adopted a non-directive, observational stance during a Six Bricks construction activity. By using, demonstrating or physically assisting, the teacher created opportunities for peer teaching and collaborative problem solving. This demonstrates that guided play provides a platform where children can experiment, and experience tasks through hands-on activities while teachers remain present to offer verbal support and guidance.

Extract 01

Teacher: Student A, teach them how to build it.

Student A (*points to the green brick*): Here, put it on top.

Teacher: Where does the green one go? on top or at the bottom?

Student D (*points*): On top.

(*Student F still unsure how to place it.*)

Teacher (gives a verbal tip but no physical help): The green brick needs to stand upright.

Student D: Oh... put it near the red one.

Teacher: That is right, you can place it between the red and the orange ones. (*says it while observing*)

(*Student A continues helping Student F, placing the green brick on top of the red and orange ones.*)

(*Student F places another yellow brick correctly.*)

Student A: That is right.

Teacher: Is it correct now? Good! Finished. Now help teach Student E and Student C.

(*Student F stands up.*)

Student A (*compares their own construction with Student E's*): Not the same.

Teacher: Who is going to teach them?

(*Student F raises his/her hand.*)

Teacher: Student F, you teach them. Put your bricks in front of them and tell them where to place the red one.

Student F: Red and orange first, then green and yellow.

(*Student E tries to stack a yellow brick and hands a green brick to Student C*)

Student F: All done.

Student E: Teacher, I am finished.

Student F: I taught them.

Teacher: Wow, excellent! Alright, each group gets one point.

Student F: Yeah!

According to the teacher's self-reflection, her observational presence is evident in her use of questions in lieu of direct instructions. When Student F appeared unsure, the teacher provided only verbal support: "*The green brick needs to stand upright*", allowing children to work through the challenge themselves through hands-on exploration. This approach was enabled by the play setting, which allowed children to physically interact with materials and learn through trial and experience.

The teacher's reflections revealed that the guided play setting enabled her to more readily encourage peer support during collaborative task completion. This was evident when she prompted: "*Student A, teach them how to build it*" and later "*Student F, you teach them*". Even when confirming correct responses, the teacher remained non-judgmental in her feedback: "*That is right, you can place it between the red and the orange ones*" (*says it while observing*). This approach, combining verbal guidance with

hands-on activity, provided space for children to build self-confidence and value their own achievements. The impact of this facilitative environment was demonstrated when Student F proudly announced: *"I taught them"*, reflecting a sense of accomplishment and emerging leadership identity that arose naturally through the collaborative play process.

Play offers a distinctive pedagogical framework that differs fundamentally from traditional teaching approaches. In conventional classroom settings, children are often required to respond immediately to teacher questions, which can undermine self-confidence and create a reluctance to approach challenges. In contrast, guided play provides a supportive structure where children still receive teacher guidance yet are afforded space to experience learning at their own pace. The teacher's positioning enabled children to take initiative, guide their peers, and experience authentic leadership moments. Through hands-on engagement, children can think, process, and internalise their learning rather than producing immediate responses under pressure.

Theme 2: Preparing for Responsive Adaptation

The teacher demonstrated responsive adaptation in Extract 02 during a Six Bricks stacking activity. Initially, the teacher had planned for children to stack six bricks; however, after observing children's attempts during a practice round, most students indicated they could not manage six bricks but could succeed with five. The teacher opted to modify the original plan, making a responsive decision to adapt the task and allowing the children to proceed with five bricks. This adaptation honoured children's voices and adjusted the activity to match their developmental readiness. The guided play setting enabled this flexibility, as the teacher could observe, listen, and respond to children's feedback in real time.

Extract 02

Teacher: Our goal now is to stack the five bricks on top of each other. Do you know what to do?

(Student A nods.)

Student B *(points at the score board):* We don't have any points so far.

Teacher: Come on! Keep going! If you want more points, you have to work together, not build on your own. Alright! Put all the bricks on the floor first. *(Teacher helps students place the bricks down, encouraging collaboration.)*

Student C: We have almost done!

Teacher: Not yet. I will count to three before we start. Three... two... one... start.

Student E: Build... build... build the yellow one! (points at Student B) Teacher, he isn't building.

Student B (places a brick quietly): It's done.

Student E: Let me count... one... two... three... four... five, five bricks!

Student B: Yeah!

Student E (claps): Yeah!

(Students B and E have successfully stacked all five bricks. Students D and F have also finished their stacking.)

Teacher: Don't knock it over. We will wait for Student A and Student C. *(Highlighting that leadership is not only about winning but supporting others.)*

(Student A and Student C continue trying to stack the bricks using the tongs. Peers cheer for them.)

Student E: Be careful.

(Student A and Student C finish. Student C and Student E clap.)

Teacher: Amazing teamwork! Each group gets one point.

When Student B pointed out “*We don't have any points so far*”, the teacher responded with encouragement while redirecting toward collaboration: “*Come on! Keep going! If you want more points, you have to work together, not build on your own*”. In line with one of the key findings in Extract 01, the teacher noted that the guided play setting provided her with opportunities to support children in shifting their focus from individual achievement to collective effort. This reframing fostered leadership to be expressed through cooperation and mutual support, as children began to recognise that success could be measured by group accomplishment.

The play setting also enabled leadership to emerge among the children themselves. Student E demonstrated initiative by guiding peers: “*Build... build... build the yellow one!*” and monitoring progress: “*Let me count... one... two... three... four... five, five bricks!*”. When Student E noticed a peer not participating, he brought this to the teacher's attention: “*Teacher, he isn't building*”, showing emerging leadership through peer accountability. The teacher reflected that such moments of peer accountability, while demonstrating leadership initiative, could potentially trigger negative feelings among group members. She pointed out that the guided play context allowed her to observe these dynamics and consider how to address such situations sensitively, ensuring that peer accountability strengthens collaboration without undermining group cohesion or individual self-esteem. Although such moments may appear negative on the surface, they present valuable learning opportunities for children, as the teacher recognised.

Responsive adaptation within guided play contexts creates pedagogical conditions conducive to leadership development. By adapting the task based on children's feedback, the teacher validated children's voices and created an environment where they felt confident to participate fully. The play context enabled this flexibility, allowing the teacher to observe and respond to children's needs as they emerged. Within this adapted activity, children demonstrated experiential engagement in a range of diverse leadership skillset behaviours, including taking initiative, guiding peers, monitoring group progress, and supporting others to complete tasks.

Theme 3: Approaching with Affirming Mindsets

Analysis of Extract 03 reveals how the teacher approached the Macau Tower building activity with an affirming mindset that recognised and valued diverse expressions of leadership. Without prescribing a single correct method or outcome, the teacher created space for children to interpret the task in their own ways and exercise leadership through varied approaches. The teacher showed a photo of the Macau Tower and invited children to build their version, remaining open to how children would approach this challenge.

Throughout the activity, the teacher demonstrated belief in children's capabilities by affirming their collaborative efforts and encouraging them to share their thinking with peers. She explicitly stated that they could create their own version without merely replicating the teacher's instruction.

Extract 03

(The teacher gives out blocks and shows a photo of the Macau Tower, drawing the children's attention to the shape of the tower.)

Teacher: Children in the Blue Group, do you know what you want to build?

Six students: Macau Tower!

Teacher: Okay! Let's start.

Student A (*grabbing Student B's hand*): Build this one.

Student B (*stacking the blocks on top of each other*): It's my turn.

Student A (*stacking the blocks*): Then it's my turn. *(The two students keep stacking the blocks.)*

Student A: Press the block a bit harder.

Student B: Teacher, we have to build 61 levels?

Teacher: Please share your idea with Student A. *(The teacher encourages him to explain his thinking.)*

Student B: It is so high!

Student A (*blocking Student B's hand gently*): Stop and think. Count first. (*Counts the layers*) One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine. (*Then continues stacking the blocks.*)

Teacher (*praising Student A and Student B*): A round of applause for Student A and Student B for their cooperation.

Student D: We collaborate with each too.

Teacher: You don't have to follow the teacher's method; you can build your own version of the Macau Tower.

The teacher's affirming mindset is evident from the outset when she invited children's ownership of the task: "*Children in the Blue Group, do you know what you want to build?*", positioning children as decision makers beyond merely following instructions. Student A demonstrated leadership by guiding his peer: "*Build this one*" and offering technical advice: "*Press the block a bit harder*". When Student B expressed concern about the height requirement, "*Teacher, we have to build 61 levels?*", the teacher affirmed his thinking and encouraged peer communication. This response validated Student B's question as worthy of discussion without dismissing it, while creating an opportunity for collaborative problem-solving.

Student A's directive to Student B, "*Stop and think. Count first*", demonstrated leadership through encouraging reflective practice. The teacher finally recognised this collaborative leadership by publicly affirming their efforts: "*A round of applause for Student A and Student B for their cooperation*". When Student D sought recognition for their group's collaboration in the final part of the extract, the teacher responded with an affirming statement that validated diverse approaches. This affirmation communicated belief in all the children's capacities to lead and contribute in their own ways, reinforcing that leadership is not about conforming to a single model but about exercising initiative and influence authentically.

The teacher's affirming mindset created conditions where diverse leadership expressions could emerge and be recognised. By communicating belief in all the children's capabilities, validating their collaborative efforts, and explicitly stating that multiple approaches were acceptable, the teacher positioned every child as a potential leader. This approach enabled the children to demonstrate leadership through varied means: directive guidance, collaborative negotiation, reflective thinking, and peer encouragement. Building on this foundation of affirmation, the following section examines how teachers' equity consciousness further supports inclusive leadership development by actively attending to cultural differences and varied abilities.

Theme 4: Centering Equity Awareness

The fourth extract illustrates how equity consciousness enables teachers to recognise and support leadership development among children whose participation patterns differ from dominant classroom norms. Student C had exhibited minimal verbal expression during both intervention cycles, rarely sharing ideas or participating vocally in group activities. Significantly, the teacher did not operate from preconceptions about which children were “capable” speakers or natural leaders. Instead, she positioned herself to recognise and invite participation from all children, including those who typically remained quiet. When Student C raised his hand, the teacher created space for his voice, trusting him to share with the entire class.

Extract 04

Teacher: For the children in the Blue Group, can you tell the children in the Green and Red Groups what you have done?

(Student C raises his hand).

Teacher: Student C, can you tell us what you have done?

Student C: We built a house with blocks. That is my home.

Teacher *(pointing to the houses built by the Blue Group):* Are their LEGO buildings pretty?

All students: Yes, very pretty.

Teacher *(holding up the drawings made by the Green and Red Groups):* Let’s look at the drawings from the Green and Red Groups.

The teacher’s equity consciousness is evident when she invited the Blue Group to share their work. When Student C raised his hand, the teacher recognised this rare moment of self-initiated participation and invited his contribution. Student C responded by sharing: *“We built a house with blocks. That is my home”*. This brief statement held particular significance given Student C’s typical reluctance to speak. By sharing their voice, Student C demonstrated leadership and helped the group understand what the project meant to them. The teacher affirmed Student C’s contribution by directing the class’s attention to the Blue Group’s work, prompting the collective response: *“Yes, very pretty”*. The teacher then equally validated the work of other groups, demonstrating that all contributions were valued, regardless of the form they took.

Centering equity awareness enables teachers to create inclusive leadership opportunities for all children. The teacher's approach, which did not privilege typically vocal or confident students, ensured every child, regardless of background, could access leadership opportunities when ready. This equity-conscious practice recognises that cultural backgrounds, developmental levels, and individual temperaments shape how children express leadership. This is particularly important in Macau, an intercultural city where early years classrooms bring together children from a wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, making equitable recognition of diverse leadership expressions essential.

Practical Challenges for Play-Based Leadership Development

Several challenges have emerged and warrant further investigation. Hands-on activities offer valuable opportunities to engage students in meaningful tasks and foster creative, problem-solving, teamwork and leadership skills as a skill set. However, explicit instruction and guidance is another core factor that makes play-based learning more impactful, as reflected by the teacher. Supporting children with SEN often requires additional time. This raises important questions about time allocation sustainability within examination-oriented educational systems (e.g. in Macau).

In inclusive education settings, supporting children with diverse learning needs and varying paces of progress presents a significant challenge in task and time allocation. These differential learning needs are further complicated by group composition, which this study found significantly affects children performance. Children demonstrated smoother task completion when they selected their own groups or were grouped by gender, compared to random or teacher-assigned grouping.

While providing space for leadership development is constructive, the teacher reported that it can occasionally result in dominant behaviours (e.g. See Theme 2) and emotional expressions that disrupt the learning environment. A teachers' responsive presence is essential for attending to young learners' behaviour and emotions while maintaining a supportive learning climate, consistent with theme 1 findings.

Implications and Conclusion

Findings from this study highlight the potential of guided play as a pedagogical approach for nurturing young children's leadership capability in Macau, with evidence suggesting that it is particularly impactful in supporting the learning and participation of children with SEN. Across the four identified themes, leadership emerges not as preparation for a distant future but as recognition of the "now" of every child, acknowledging them as current contributors and citizens in the present. This also affirms the

importance of inclusivity, recognising that all children have leadership potential, not only those who occupy formal or noticeable roles. These findings extend prior scholarship emphasising that leadership develops through social participation rather than formal instruction (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011; Shin et al., 2004), and that leadership skillsets are dynamically co-created through interaction rather than consisting of fixed, individualised tasks (Northouse, 2025; Sun et al., 2017; Popper & Mayseless, 2007). The following conceptual framework, the TAP Model, integrates Teacher Practice Pillars, Opportunities for *Agency*, and Guided *Play*. This framework synthesises these findings, illustrating how these dynamic, interactive components of teacher practice collectively support the cultivation of young children's leadership within guided play.

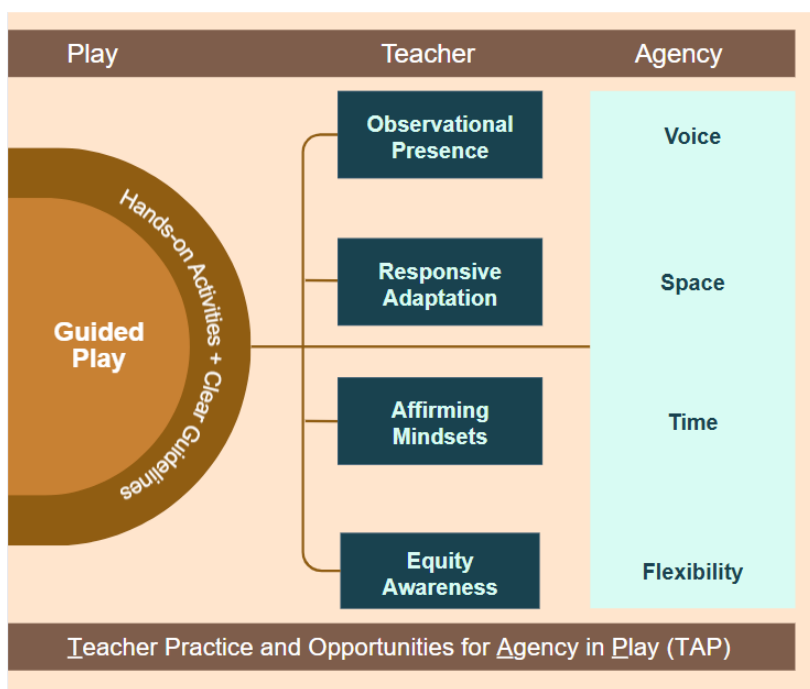


Figure 1. The TAP Model for Children's Leadership

Firstly, the teacher's observational stance creates a facilitative environment that grants children the time and space to engage at their own pace. Leadership does not arise through instruction but emerges organically through peers' shared decision-making and mutual support. These child-led behaviours reflect dispositions of care, responsibility, and empathy. This aligns closely with the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF UK, 1989), which highlights fostering respect for others and enabling children to participate meaningfully in their social worlds. By situating

young children's leadership in their everyday relational encounters, guided social play demonstrates how they can enact leadership in ways that are developmentally authentic, relational, and socially significant.

Second, being ready to flexibly follow children's changing leadership behaviours allows teachers to anticipate every moment of children's leadership generation. The teacher's emphasis on waiting for all to finish and celebrating teamwork also enhances the understanding that leadership encompasses care for others and collective success, not merely individual achievement (Dewey, 1916; Rinaldi, 2006). This aligns with contemporary perspectives that view leadership in early childhood as emerging through social participation and co-agency rather than through top-down instruction (Chen, 2023; OECD, 2019). Further research is warranted to examine how teachers make responsive decisions when children's leadership behaviours shift unexpectedly.

Foregrounding the cultivation of growing and affirming mindsets becomes important. A growth mindset has been shown to predict academic achievement in adolescents with high self-affirmation (Wang et al., 2022). Such affirming attitudes may not only be enacted pedagogically through flexible learning environments but may also strengthen leadership in uncertain times, allowing young children to cultivate future-oriented thinking, whether they are navigating turbulent rivers or calm streams (Gurr et al., 2025). Through this, young children can begin to notice differently, support their peers, and negotiate ideas in more expressive ways.

Additionally, research shows that the interplay of urban environments and multilingual culture can enhance learners' agency in their writing and creative thinking (Tang, 2024). As a region shaped by the diverse cultures of Portugal, China, and beyond, schools in Macau are uniquely positioned to leverage cultural and linguistic diversity as a leadership asset rather than a challenge. When children encounter peers with different cultural backgrounds, languages, and perspectives within play-based contexts, they develop more nuanced understandings of leadership, recognising that leadership is not monolithic but expressed through varied ways of communicating, deciding, and caring (Chen, 2023). Building on this, early childhood pedagogies can draw on the integration of play and the urban environment to further strengthen young children's leadership skillsets through lived experience (Hadani & Vey, 2021).

In Macau's academically task-oriented educational culture, where quick and accurate responses are often privileged (Jiang et al., 2021), there is a need to shift toward more inclusive, relational, and equitable participation. This approach requires educators to slow down and recognise differences across individuals and environments. Such recognition ensures that children with varying temperaments, diverse cultural backgrounds, and different developmental needs, including children with SEN, can meaningfully contribute to collaborative processes within play-based learning contexts.

From an implementation perspective, it is recommended that educators explore structured coaching and mentoring practices (Kraft et al., 2018), a dual-level approach supporting both teacher and student development of self-regulation. However, cultivating self-awareness and self-regulation proves more essential than technical knowledge alone. Teachers need sustained professional coaching to cultivate refined observational competencies, make responsive pedagogical decisions within dynamic play contexts, and develop affirming instructional practices. Concurrently, children benefit from simple reflective dialogue with peers and their teachers that enhances their self-awareness and appreciation of others' leadership contributions, thereby building metacognitive understanding of their emerging agency. For both, developing inner awareness forms the foundation for meaningful growth.

To conclude, through participatory action research, this study examined how guided play fosters young children's leadership expressions in Macau. The findings reconceptualise leadership not as preparation for future adult roles but as recognition of children's present agency and ongoing contributions. Leadership can be democratised and enacted through diverse forms of communication, collaboration, and care, with important implications for preparing young learners to participate meaningfully in global communities, particularly in an era shaped by artificial intelligence. Future research should investigate coaching methodologies and mentoring structures that support teachers in implementing guided play and cultivate young children's co-regulation competencies, alongside the broader development of leadership skillsets through collaborative learning processes.

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