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CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE EDUCATION LEADERSHIP IN MULTICULTURAL CONTEXTS: PRIVATE ISLAMIC SCHOOL DIRECTORS' VOCES FROM THAILAND'S DEEP SOUTH

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the application of culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) in private Islamic schools in Thailand's three southernmost provinces, drawing on Khalifa et al.'s (2016) framework. Employing a multi-case study design, three school directors were recruited from private Islamic schools to represent diverse school contexts. Data were collected primarily through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that successful leadership is achieved through a holistic and strategic alignment of four key domains: adopting critical self-reflection, developing culturally responsive teachers, promoting an inclusive environment, and engaging stakeholders including families and communities. Effective school leaders demonstrated a contextualized approach, using local Islamic and cultural identity as the foundation for the school's vision and moral authority. The study concludes that culturally responsive school directors serve as the vital mechanism for maintaining school resilience, fostering inclusivity, and balancing local cultural preservation with global adaptability. Practical implications call for specific training in Islamic leadership ethics, decentralization of curricular autonomy, and systemic support for heritage-based instruction to build a pipeline of ethically grounded and culturally competent school directors in the multicultural landscape. This study extends Khalifa et al.'s (2016) culturally responsive school leadership framework to an underexplored setting, private Islamic schools in Thailand's three southernmost provinces, and shows how CRSL is enacted through the strategic alignment of critical self-reflection, teacher development, inclusive school culture, and stakeholder engagement.

KEYWORDS: Culturally Responsive Leadership, Multicultural Education Contexts, Private Islamic Schools, School Directors, Thailand's Deep South.

1. INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership in multicultural K-12 settings tends to prioritize indigenism, ethnicity, and race, often overlooking gender, religion, and disabilities; therefore, promoting social justice and educational equity demands a culturally sensitive leadership framework that intentionally addresses the full spectrum of diverse community needs (Bourgeois et al., 2025; Cuéllar et al., 2020). Brown et al.'s (2021) study, for instance, reveals that increasing migration patterns, as evidenced in a four-country European study (Austria, Ireland, Russia, and Spain), have made schools significantly more diverse in terms of language, culture, religion, and ethnicity. This transformation necessitates that school leaders actively promote and guarantee equity of participation for all students with a migration background (Washington, 2021). This previous literature taken place in Western contexts may not be sufficiently tailored to the unique challenges of a multicultural and multilingual school environment where culturally responsive leadership framework is often lacking (Hallinger, & Kovačević, 2021), especially for non-English-speaking settings, such as Thailand. Drawing upon recent studies regarding Thailand's basic education (Durongkaverroj, 2022; Merzouk, 2025; Nomnian et al., 2025; Sarasean, 2024), there have been issues and challenges that hinder educational development and students' academic achievement. Previous studies on educational inequity in Thailand (e.g. Ariyaarpakamol, 2019; Arphattananon, 2025; Koompai & Rakangthong, 2022; Rueangdej & Nomnian, 2021) suggest that quality of education in schools is highly segregated, leading to a distinct rural-urban divide. These issues are underpinned by limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and outdated equipment; and the struggle to attract and retain qualified teachers, relying on less-experienced staff who must often teach multiple subjects/grade levels (Nomnian & Arphattananon, 2018a, 2018b). These pressing systemic issues in Thailand are deep-seated educational inequality, which is intrinsically linked to socioeconomic status and geography. This disparity reveals that a student's academic opportunity and future income potential are largely determined by their family's wealth and geographic location, perpetuating a cycle of poverty (Office of the Education Council, 2023).

Jatuporn's (2025) study, for example, suggests that to transform educational leadership and achieve greater equity in schools in Northern Thailand, five interconnected recommendations are crucial: developing an asset-based mindset among leaders to

value diversity; creating supportive policy systems; implementing culturally integrated curriculum frameworks; enhancing staff cultural competencies; and establishing continuous assessment practices. These collective efforts offer promising strategies for leveraging cultural differences as valuable educational assets while effectively meeting the needs of Thailand's diverse student populations.

In this study, however, the three southern border provinces of Thailand comprising of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat are distinctive in their sociocultural and political milieu. These are predominantly Malay-Muslim areas, with strong local Islamic identity and a history of conflict. Ayae and Savski's (2024) study provides a nuanced understanding of how schools in this conflict-affected region function as crucial sites where past resilience, present resistance, and future aspirations are visibly negotiated through the very language and symbols that define their physical space. Private institutions in Thailand's Deep South hold a crucial role within the complex educational landscape. Predominantly Islamic in nature, these schools have undergone an institutional evolution, transforming from traditional Islamic schools into formal private educational establishments (Lateh et al., 2024). They operate a dual curriculum including competency-based curriculum (CBC), integrating rigorous Islamic religious education with general academic subjects, thereby satisfying the local community's demand for both spiritual and secular learning outcomes. Effective CBC policy implementation in Thailand's Deep South reveals four key factors including policy implementation at the school level, influence of sociocultural and linguistic contexts, the support of the MoE, and the inclusive engagement of stakeholders (Nomnian et al., 2025).

To address the challenge of increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in schools, effective leadership is the indispensable mechanism for creating equitable learning environments by cultivating inclusive cultures, directing teacher practice, and boosting student engagement (Shopie & Badawi, 2025). Research regarding educational leadership in multicultural contexts, particularly in remote areas that are Muslim-dominant is under-explored. To effectively serve Muslim communities, educational leadership should adopt and champion Islamic ethical traditions encompassing the pursuit of knowledge (science), devotional practice (worship), equity (justice), and charitable action; all of which the leadership's primary responsibility is then to ensure these core values are actively instilled in the students (Elwahayshe & Rosdi, 2024).

There is limited literature that systematically addresses the role of educational leaders in ensuring the inclusion of Muslim students and teachers within diverse school systems, despite this group remaining especially marginalized globally. This applies even more acutely in multilingual or multicultural contexts. Addressing this research gap could contribute significantly to improving educational quality and equity in a region where leadership is not only pedagogical, but also socially and politically critical. This study aims to explore effective educational leadership strategies that integrate community expectations, modern pedagogical standards, and conflict-sensitive practices are best positioned to break cycles of low achievement and foster equitable educational opportunities. This study hopes to shed a positive light in this landscape that leadership is not just administrative; it is, in fact, a critical driver of stability, innovation, and social cohesion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study employed “Culturally Responsive School Leadership Framework” (see Fig 1.) developed by Khalifa et al. (2016), which will be discussed with each key component as follows.

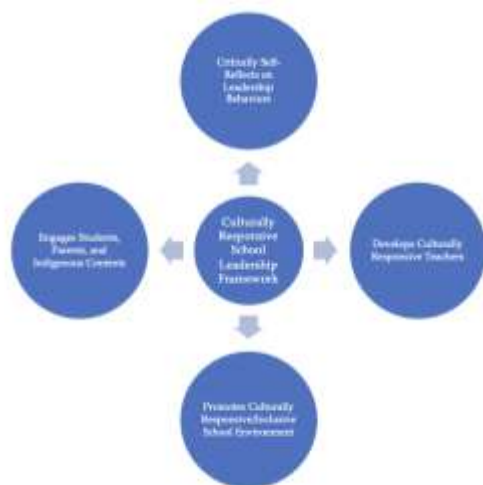


Figure 1. Culturally responsive school leadership framework (Khalifa et al., 2016).

2.1. Critically Self-Reflects On Leadership Behaviors

School leaders not only inspire and motivate staff and students to embrace cultural diversity, but also encourage innovation, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability. They can promote harmony in diversity by articulating a clear vision, fostering a shared sense of purpose, and encouraging teachers and students to embrace multicultural perspectives. Important

traits of transformational leaders include visionary thinking, individualized support, and intellectual stimulation. For culturally diverse schools to succeed, especially in accommodating culturally diverse students, teachers and communities, a holistic approach is vital, encompassing positive local community relationships, collaborative shared decision-making, continuous professional development, and measurable gains in student academic performance, retention, and engagement (Washington, 2021). School leaders not only need to reflect on their actions by adopting a critical lens and various communication styles, but also navigate culturally-appropriate ways to build collaboration and trust among staff and students in diverse school landscape (Fisher, 2021). Dedwongsa and Lapchareon (2023) suggest that school administrators must possess the capacity to lead effectively across cultural boundaries. This involves a thoughtful approach to managing diverse human resources by encompassing variations in language, values, attitudes, and cognitive styles. Rohani et al.'s (2025) research, for example, indicates that effective Islamic educational leadership is built upon a visionary foundation that strategically integrates three components: Islamic values, collective participation, and continuous innovation. This powerful harmony between spirituality and modernity is the primary driver of organizational transformation, resulting in excellent, values-oriented institutions. In this present study, sustaining the relevance of Islamic education in private Islamic schools is, therefore, directly dependent on strengthening this integrated leadership vision.

2.2. Develops Culturally Responsive Teachers

Instructional school leaders focus on improving teaching and learning by guiding curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. In multicultural contexts, this role expands to include cultural responsiveness, equity, and inclusion. Culturally responsive teaching, as defined by Gay (2018), establishes that students learn most effectively and achieve success when they feel validated and cared for by their teachers. This requires building on student strengths, maintaining high expectations, and utilizing four pedagogical components: caring relationships, clear communication, relevant curriculum, and culturally-congruent teaching methods. School leaders prioritize the needs of others, especially students and staff, build trust and collaboration across cultural lines by emphasizing empathy, listening, stewardship, and ethical decision-making. Given the rising linguistic and cultural heterogeneity within

schools, instructional leadership assumes a pivotal role in ensuring equity (Shopie & Badawi, 2025). Its influence is essential for establishing truly inclusive school cultures, guiding pedagogical practices, and optimizing student engagement, all of which contribute significantly to the creation of equitable learning environments. Multicultural relevance can thus encourage leaders to embrace diversity, foster inclusive visions, and empower marginalized voices. School leaders decentralize decision-making and empower teachers and mid-level leaders to take ownership and responsibilities for planning and implementing school's policies, missions, and strategies to promote school's multicultural ecosystem. They can help build local capacity, encourage collaboration, and ensure initiatives tailored to the school's specific context by being equipped with relevant competencies including collaboration, shared accountability, and empowerment.

2.3. Promotes Culturally Responsive/Inclusive School Environment

Culturally responsive school leaders emphasize understanding and valuing cultural diversity, promoting inclusivity, and navigating cultural complexities effectively, which can balance local cultural values with global perspectives. They can foster an environment where Thai and local traditions and wisdoms are respected while embracing international ideas, helping students develop bicultural or multicultural competencies. In multicultural and non-English-speaking K-12 settings, educational leadership is often conceptualized through the lens of indigenism, ethnicity, or race, while gender, religion, and disabilities are less often addressed. A culturally sensitive leadership approach that incorporates these broader community factors is therefore necessary to promote social justice and educational equity (Cuéllar et al., 2020). The focus on understanding and valuing cultural backgrounds of teachers, students and communities is vital as it can promote equity by adapting policies and practices to reflect diverse cultural norms and experiences. Culturally-aware pedagogical practices, inclusive curriculum, community engagement, and advocacy for under-represented groups must be upheld and recognized. Yusoh and Ruangpan (2022) state that leaders should genuinely understand the needs and perspectives of their co-workers and staff, strictly adhere to the organization's regulations and policies maintains institutional integrity and accountability, and continuously motivate personnel to foster

dedication, pursuit of excellence, and sustained high performance.

2.4. Engages Students, Parents, And Indigenous Context

School leaders navigating diverse contexts by proactively addressing the socio-cultural, historical, and political realities of students, families, and their communities by leveraging their cultural assets to promote academic success and well-being (Khalifa et al., 2016). Specifically, school leaders are required to not only engage students by affirming their identities and incorporating their experiences into the curriculum but also to prioritize active partnership with parents and community members by structuring inclusive decision-making processes (Rueangdej & Nomnian, 2021). Contemporary leaders are strongly advised to draw upon Islamic doctrines to address modern challenges, thereby ensuring that spiritual and ethical dimensions actively inform and guide both policy-making and leadership practices (Ruhullah & Ushama, 2025). Culturally responsive leadership is essential for transforming schools into empowering environments that recognize and utilize the full spectrum of community knowledge for student achievement and parental engagement.

In this study, Thailand's Deep South has been at its an intersection of systemic inequality, dual-curriculum complexity, teacher shortages, under-resourcing, and regional conflict. Despite their essential function, private Islamic schools in the Deep South face several persistent challenges. According to Ayae and Savski (2024), students' academic performance is underachieved. Their outcomes on standardized national examinations frequently fall below the national average, suggesting an immediate need for enhanced pedagogical strategies and resource allocation. There is also a lack of teacher professional development. A significant proportion of the teaching staff, particularly in Islamic Studies, lacks formal pedagogical training and certification, which directly impacts instructional quality. In addition, the persistent regional conflict complicates educational delivery by impacting the safety and well-being of both students and educators. In response to these systemic issues, various initiatives have been implemented, including curriculum development and teacher training programs, aimed at integrating modern educational practices with traditional Islamic teachings (Lateh et al., 2024; Samoh & Premsrirat, 2021).

Culturally responsive leadership is, therefore, not

only about managing teachers and curriculum, but also about balancing national educational policies, religious identity, and multicultural dynamics. School leaders demand transformational, culturally informed, and contextually adaptive educational leadership styles to deal with various diverse linguistic and cultural challenges. Educational institutions in this region range from formal schools to mosque-based tadika schools, significantly shaped by Islamic traditions and community structures. The region's history of insurgency and political unrest adds further complexity to school leadership, as administrators must navigate not only pedagogical goals but also community trust and security. School leaders must design policies that reflect cultural pluralism and equity. Training in cultural competence and anti-bias education is necessary. Community partnerships require strong ties with families

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Multi-Case Study Research Design

This study employed a multi-case study research design to facilitate an in-depth, comparative exploration of directors' narratives regarding CBC across multiple private schools in Thailand's three southernmost provinces. This approach was selected for its ability to investigate a phenomenon within its real-life context and to identify patterns, themes, and variations across different settings (Adams et al., 2022; Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). By examining two or more cases that share the characteristic of being private schools in the education sandbox initiative but differ significantly in school sizes (small, medium, and extra-large), the researchers enhanced the robustness and generalizability of the findings, which is crucial for understanding the complex role of contextual factors in this region.

3.2. Participants and Ethical Clearance

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was formally secured from the IPSR-Institutional Review Board (IPSR-IRB) and the Committee for Research Ethics (Social Sciences) of Mahidol University (Project No. IPSR-IRB-2022-219; COA No. 2022/11-219). Participants included three school directors recruited using the snowball sampling technique, a purposeful qualitative method necessary for accessing hard-to-reach populations within the study's unique geographical and cultural context (Naderifar et al., 2017). Table 1 illustrates the participants' demographic data.

and local communities to enhance culturally-grounded leadership.

Table 1: Participants' demographic data.

Participant	Age (years old)	Gender
Religion	Province	School size
Director A	More than 60's	Male
Muslim	Narathiwat	Small (1-120 students)
Director B	50's	Female
Muslim	Pattani	Medium (121-600 students)
Director C	More than 60's	Male
Muslim	Yala	Extra-large (more than 1,500 students)

3.3. Data Collection And Analysis

Data were primarily collected from each director through semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 30–45 minutes and conducted in the Thai language. The interviews were recorded.

The questions are as follows:

1. Please introduce yourself, state your current position, and summarize your professional experience (work/teaching history).
2. What are your views on the Ministry of Education's (MoE) policy regarding the implementation of CBC and instruction?
3. What is your opinion on the implementation of CBC within your own school?
4. In your opinion, what are the key factors and processes driving the implementation of the CBC, and how have these factors influenced the context of your specific educational institution?
5. What do you consider to be the primary problems, challenges, and obstacles encountered during the CBC implementation, and how have you managed or addressed these issues?

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and professionally translated into English for subsequent analysis. Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (2019) was employed to explore subjectivity, reflexivity, and the active role of the researcher in generating themes regarding the directors' voices that resonate directly with their experiences, effectively bridging the gap between theories, practical implications, and future recommendations.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Drawing upon Khalifa et al. (2016)'s four key components regarding culturally responsive leadership framework, the findings are presented and discussed as follows:

4.1. Critically Self-Reflects on Leadership Behaviors

Director B clearly reflected on the non-negotiable cultural and religious identity of the school

community. The reflection led to the understanding that to achieve true equity and success, the central belief system must be acknowledged, honored, and integrated, rather than marginalized. She not only upheld Islam as a school's shared religious belief but also encouraged inclusive visioning and empowered diverse voices of parents and communities.

We fully embrace the integration of Islam in everyday life, and we strive to ensure everything aligns with the values of our community and meets parents' expectations. (Director B)

By fully embracing the integration of Islam in daily life, Director B articulated a clear and compelling vision that resonates with the community's cultural and spiritual values. This inspires collective purpose and unity among staff, students, and families. Director respected for Islamic principles, setting an example that built trust and moral authority, which fostered admiration and commitment from stakeholders, especially parents. The school's efforts to meet parents' expectations and honor community values demonstrated sensitivity to the unique needs and beliefs of its members, which reflected leadership that nurtured relationships and supports personal and cultural identity.

Through the integration of Islamic values into modern education, Director B encouraged innovative thinking by promoting a holistic, contextually relevant approach to education. Director B's culturally grounded leadership exemplified transformational leadership by inspiring change, honoring Islamic identity, and fostering a shared vision rooted in the community's values.

Director C's leadership, however, demonstrated a self-reflection focused on integrity, responsibility, and adherence to established governance, resulting in a clear, high-standard operational model.

Managing private schools is somewhat like public schools in terms of administration. However, public school administrators are responsible for overseeing all aspects of the institution including academic affairs, personnel, financial management, and the entire operational system by having the director serving as the central figure. Budgets are allocated based on specific projects, and the level of pressure is relatively moderate. Administrators follow the policies set by the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) and carry out their duties to the fullest. At the same time, they must ensure that educational quality continues to progress. (Director C)

Director C served as a central figure who modeled dedication and integrity, managing all aspects of the

school in terms of academics, personnel, finance with a sense of responsibility and purpose. This built trust and set a high standard for others to follow. By aligning with OBEC policies and striving to implement them fully, he communicated a clear and motivating vision. Even with limited budget flexibility, he inspired staff to pursue excellence and maintain educational quality. Even with moderate pressure and limited budget flexibility, the director modeled a commitment to purpose. This was a subtle act of self-reflection by recognizing that even when resources were constrained, the leader's commitment to the vision of quality education had to remain the driving force to inspire staff.

According to Hallinger (2003, 2011), school directors can inspire change by articulating a compelling vision, modeling values, and motivating stakeholders to commit to shared goals. In this study, Islamic values were integrated into everyday school life, creating a vision that resonated with parents and the wider community. Moral authority and trust are built by embodying Islamic principles, which inspired admiration and collective commitment. Innovative thinking was encouraged by contextualizing modern education within cultural and religious frameworks. Integrity and dedication in managing academics, personnel, and finance were modelled. OBEC policies while motivating staff to pursue excellence were aligned despite limited resources. School directors B and C demonstrated transformational qualities. Director B showed them through cultural-spiritual visioning, while Director C addressed them through policy-driven integrity. Together, they illustrated how culturally responsive leadership was adapted to the school's context rooted in community's Muslim identity.

Both school directors recognized that their authority, while significant, needed to be shared. The act of empowering diverse voices suggested a reflection on the need to move from a top-down model to a collaborative one, thereby ensuring decisions was legitimate and aligned with community expectations. Their authority illustrated a direct outcome of self-reflection on how to lead authentically and ethically within a specific cultural matrix. They showcased that effective leadership was an outcome of intentional reflection in that one prioritizing the spiritual and cultural context for transformational change, and the other prioritizing integrity and administrative effectiveness within a bureaucratic context.

4.2. Develops Culturally Responsive Teachers

Directors A and B provide clear evidence of how

effective instructional leadership works to develop culturally responsive teachers by strategically aligning vision, pedagogy, and professional support. Both directors exemplified leadership that moved beyond mere compliance to intentionally shape a classroom culture where diversity was an asset, and learning was active and relevant. Teachers were promoted by aligning school's vision, missions, culturally responsive pedagogy, and professional development to create classrooms where students became active, competent, and confident learners.

The school is a competency-based institution, with learners at the center of the process. Teachers have the responsibility to encourage students to become more confident in expressing themselves. Teachers will help students develop by, for example, allowing them to propose assignments to the teacher, having students present in front of the class after lessons, encouraging interaction between students and their peers as well as with teachers, and promoting group work. (Director A)

These activities built academic confidence and encouraged students to bring their own knowledge and voice (cultural capital) into the lesson. The teacher acted as a coach/mentor, managing student-centered activities. The school director set a strong vision in that learning was not about passive knowledge transfer, but about developing skills, confidence, and the ability to apply knowledge. He articulated this vision to guide teaching practices. Teachers were then positioned not as sole knowledge-givers, but as facilitators encouraging students to express themselves, propose ideas, and take ownership of learning. He also ensured teachers were trained and supported to shift from directive teaching to coaching and mentoring roles.

Similarly, Director B promoted the students' primary cultural and spiritual identity (Islam) into the "Smart Plus" pedagogical approach by ensuring that learning was contextually relevant and applicable to students' daily lives, which was a hallmark of culturally responsive teaching.

The "Smart Plus" approach, which integrates Islamic principles into our practices. Our philosophy is that education should go beyond rote memorization; students must engage in real, hands-on learning that they can apply in their daily lives. (Director B)

The "Smart Plus" approach reflected Director's B culturally responsive leadership in shaping a clear vision in that education was not limited to rote memorization, but fostered deeper understanding, application, and relevance. She articulated this philosophy to guide teaching practices and

curriculum design. She emphasized methodologies that moved beyond passive reception of knowledge. The call for real, hands-on learning showed leadership that not only promoted experiential, inquiry-based, and problem-solving approaches, but also helped students transfer classroom learning into everyday life.

Culturally responsive school directors involved guiding teachers to adopt strategies consistent with the school's philosophy. The findings confirm that developing culturally responsive teachers was a continuous loop driven by instructional leadership that defined the culturally relevant vision emphasizing the responsive pedagogy and provided targeted training and sustained support, as well as monitored impact on student confidence and competence. In this case, leaders encouraged teachers to design lessons that balanced memorization (where necessary) with application, critical thinking, and practical engagement. Leaders ensured that instructional practices were not only philosophically sound but also consistently implemented. This means observing classrooms, providing feedback, and supporting professional development so that the Smart Plus approach became lived practice rather than abstract vision.

Similar to studies by Lateh et al. (2024) and Samoh and Premsrirat (2021), instructional school directors aligned vision, pedagogy, and teacher development to improve student learning outcomes. Director A promoted competency-based learning where students actively expressed themselves, propose assignments, and engage in group work. Teachers' directive roles were shifted to facilitators, encouraging confidence and ownership of learning. Director B introduced the Smart Plus approach, integrating Islamic principles with experiential, hands-on learning by emphasizing application, inquiry, and problem-solving beyond rote memorization. Instructional leadership ensured that both directors highlighted how vision-driven pedagogy empowers learners in that director A through competency-based methods, while director B through holistic, values-based experiential learning. To effectively and equitably administer multicultural schools, it is vital to prioritize targeted leadership training, inclusive policy development, and robust systemic support specifically designed to enhance leaders' capacity to manage linguistic diversity (Shopie & Badawi, 2025).

4.3. Promotes Culturally Responsive/Inclusive School Environment

These findings from Director A and Director B demonstrate contrasting yet effective approaches to promote a culturally responsive and inclusive school environment. The contrast depended on whether the leadership model was driven by top-down international vision (Director A) or bottom-up collaborative ownership (Director B).

Director A addressed the school's reform efforts by establishing the founder's credentials not just as an educator, but as a person with direct international work experience (flight attendant and teacher). This made the school's policy implementation feel authentic and experientially validated, rather than imposed. By emphasizing an international vision and aspiring to the Finnish education model, Director A was setting a high, universally recognized standard for competence and quality, which acted as a form of inclusion by asserting that the students were being prepared to compete and operate on a global stage.

The school owner, a former flight attendant, also worked as a teacher in Japan for three years. Through this experience of observing the operational practices of international personnel within the Japanese school environment, he gained an international vision. Furthermore, the owner frequently emphasizes his aspiration to move toward adopting the Finnish education model. (Director A)

The school environment was made inclusive by framing the local experience within a global competence framework, which made the school environment responsive to the demands of modern global life. Director A's approach was fundamentally top-down because the owner's personal knowledge and vision were the primary drivers. The success of this model relied on the community's trust in the founder's unique and proven exposure to international diversity. The owner's background (ex-flight attendant, ex-Japan teacher) suggested a comfort with global standards, diverse environments, and autonomous decision-making. highlights a top-down visionary approach where the owner's personal knowledge is the primary driver of the school's customized curriculum, independent of rigid government guidelines.

On the other hand, Director B's school environment was inherently inclusive because its structure was based on shared responsibility and widespread community access. The school's ownership structure as a foundation and cooperative with over one hundred thousand members, which

reflected distributed leadership at its core. This structural commitment to shared ownership ensured legitimacy through broad representation. By being owned by the general public and cooperative members, the school actively promoted participatory inclusion. The community contributed ideas, resources, and oversight, meaning the educational initiatives were shaped by diverse voices within that vast membership, preventing exclusion based on socioeconomic or regional status within the cooperative.

In addition, the school's responsiveness was built into its financial and operational model. The fact that funds were allocated here to support education based on member contributions meant the school was directly responsive to the needs and collective will of its immediate local/communal culture. This model naturally fostered transparency, trust, and shared purpose. This model was fundamentally bottom-up and collaborative, which promoted an inclusive environment not through a visionary figure, but through the empowerment of the collective.

The general public are the owners through a foundation. It belongs to a cooperative with over one hundred thousand members. Therefore, funds are allocated here to support education, with some contributions also coming from donations. (Director B)

The fact that the school was owned collectively through a foundation and cooperative with over one hundred thousand members reflected distributed leadership at its core. Director B emphasized collaboration and shared responsibility. In this case, the cooperative structure allowed members of the community to contribute ideas, resources, and oversight, ensuring that educational initiatives were shaped by diverse voices rather than top-down directives.

Culturally responsive leadership was shared across stakeholders, fostering collaboration, collective responsibility, and diverse input recommended by Fisher (2021). Director A drew on the founder's international experiences (Japan, Finland) to shape reform efforts. His leadership was influenced by personal expertise, reflecting a visionary but somewhat top-down model. Director B's sense of ownership was promoted through a cooperative of over 100,000 members exemplified distributed leadership. Community members contributed resources, ideas, and oversight, ensuring initiatives reflected collective voices. Distributed leadership balanced authority with collaboration. Director A's model highlighted visionary expertise,

while Director B's cooperative structure demonstrated grassroots empowerment. Both approaches showed how culturally responsive leadership could legitimize reform and sustain community trust.

4.4. Engages students, parents, and indigenous contexts

These findings from Director A and Director B provided robust evidence of how effective educational leaders engaged students, parents, and indigenous contexts by authentically embedding the local cultural heritage into the school's core functions. Their actions moved beyond mere cultural appreciation to systemic culturally responsive school leadership that validated identity and created a true sense of belonging. Director A affirmed identity and showed respect for community values as a way to promote inclusivity by integrating diverse voices and perspectives into the educational process. He not only managed the school, but also weaved education into the fabric of community life.

The school will organize a community walk project, where students will explore the community, visit the "kubor" (Muslim cemetery), walk around the school, and engage in conversations with local residents. (Director A)

The community walk project was a powerful example of culturally responsive leadership that bridged school and community, validated cultural identity, and empowered students to learn through authentic, local experiences. By including culturally significant sites such as the kubor, the school acknowledges and validates the religious and cultural heritage of its students.

By including culturally significant sites like the kubor, the school explicitly acknowledged and affirmed the religious and cultural heritage of its students, ensuring they felt their Islamic identity was valued and relevant to their education. They were empowered to become active explorers of their own community, which strengthened their sense of competence and cultural grounding.

The school adopted the Pattani Heritage framework as the foundation of its curriculum because we believe it's essential to understand and appreciate the strengths of our local community. We conducted studies and organized educational field trips for students to explore local learning resources. (Director B).

By adopting the Pattani Heritage framework, Director B demonstrated culturally responsive leadership by ensuring that the curriculum reflected and honored the cultural identity, traditions, and

values of the local community. This was not only the nature of CBC curriculum; yet, it was also leadership that validated students' backgrounds and affirmed their sense of belonging. By embedding local traditions and values into the curriculum, the school ensured that learning was contextually relevant and that students' cultural backgrounds were consistently affirmed. This direct inclusion combats the effects of monocultural curricula that often marginalized diverse learners, boosting student self-esteem and sense of belonging.

Culturally responsive leadership is relational. By engaging students with local artisans, religious institutions, historical sites, and natural environments, the school fosters mutual respect between the institution and the community. This strengthens trust and positions the school as a partner in cultural preservation and development. This leadership style cultivates students who are not only academically capable but also culturally grounded. Leaders who adopt such frameworks prepare students to navigate diverse worlds while remaining rooted in their heritage and promoting an essential balance in multicultural and globalized contexts.

School directors validated and integrated students' cultural identities into education, fostering inclusivity and belonging suggested by Dedwongsa and Lapchareon (2023). Director A organized a community walk project connected students to local heritage sites (kubor cemetery) and residents. Cultural awareness was raised and woven into community life, affirming identity and strengthening school-community ties. Director B adopted the Pattani Heritage framework, embedding local traditions and values into the curriculum that validated students' backgrounds, affirming belonging and positioning the school as a cultural partner. Culturally responsive leadership was relational and contextual. Directors A and B showed how schools could serve as custodians of heritage while preparing students for global diversity. This approach nurtured respect, identity, and inclusivity.

Integrating the indigenous/local context adopted by both directors reflected a high level of culturally responsive leadership commitment by making local culture a systemic feature rather than a token add-on. Their leadership approach was explicitly focused on validating and integrating students' cultural identities into education, which was crucial for fostering inclusivity and belonging (Dedwongsa & Lapchareon, 2023). Furthermore, this leadership style prepared students to navigate diverse worlds while remaining rooted in their heritage, which

ensured students gain global competence without sacrificing their core identity, satisfying the need for both local grounding and global readiness. This strategic engagement demonstrated how school directors could become cultural leaders who utilized the wealth of local knowledge to enrich the educational process for all stakeholders.

The findings reveal that successful educational leadership in the multicultural context of Thailand's three southernmost provinces hinges on a holistic, complex, and strategic framework that is profoundly culturally rooted yet globally adaptive. This framework is crucial for maintaining school resilience, promoting inclusivity, and fostering global citizenship, particularly within private Islamic schools in Thailand's Deep South. Culturally responsive leadership in Islamic educational settings is effective when it is not only contextualized by using the Islamic and local heritage as the foundation for the school's identity, but also strategic by utilizing transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership practices to meet the demand of local cultural preservation, religious sensitivity, and global outlook.

4.5. Implications

Drawing upon the findings regarding the alignment of vision, identity, pedagogy, and collaboration voiced by three school leaders, the following practical implications are vital for developing culturally responsive school leaders in private Islamic schools in the region.

First, training and professional development highlight that leadership authenticity stems from deep and critical self-reflection on multicultural contexts. Leadership training programs (e.g., those offered by universities or the Office of Private Education Commission) must move beyond generic administrative models. They should include modules that require prospective leaders to analyze their personal cultural biases, religious perspectives, and leadership assumptions against the backdrop of the specific local Muslim and Malay-Thai culture (Tepsing et al., 2025). In addition, educational leadership ought to integrate key Islamic traditions, specifically those related to science, worship, justice, and philanthropy into the school environment, and thus, the subsequent goal must be the inculcation of these integrated values within Muslim students (Elwahayshe & Rosdi, 2024). School leaders must also become policy mediators who can liaise and address tensions between local traditions, national curriculum requirements (OBEC policies), and global best practices for effective policy translation into

schools' academic roadmap implementation (Shopie & Badawi, 2025). It is thus important for current leaders to gain executive coaching focused on instructional leadership that helps them design the culturally responsive pedagogical shift (Hallinger, 2003). This coaching should include observation of successful local practices (like "Smart Plus" or the community walk) to make the methods concrete.

Secondly, the school ecosystem must be structurally supportive of culturally responsive practices, moving away from a centralized command structure. School leaders must ensure staff and faculty a fair treatment, guarantee equity in opportunities and responsibilities, and cultivate a workplace environment characterized by strong unity and harmony is necessary for collective success (Yusoh & Ruangpan, 2022). Community ownership and shared governance should be formalized, where applicable (or desirable), by establishing formal advisory councils or foundation structures that grant parents, local religious scholars, and community leaders' genuine oversight and decision-making authority on key educational and cultural policies (Fisher, 2021). This operationalizes distributed leadership and ensures policy legitimacy. It is vital to decentralize curriculum and budget flexibility through the advocacy for and establishment of school-level policies. School directors should be empowered by having more autonomy to customize the curriculum and allocate budgets (López, 2015). For instance, culturally impactful projects (e.g., community exploration, hiring local artisans) can potentially substitute monocultural curricula with locally relevant frameworks (like the Pattani Heritage framework). School directors' performance should be assessed by developing localized specific rubrics or indicators, aligned with Khalifa et al.'s (2016) components, particularly focusing on their effectiveness in affirming student identity and monitoring the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy.

5. CONCLUSION

This study, framed by Khalifa et al.'s (2016) Culturally Responsive School Leadership framework, reveals that successful educational leadership in the multicultural context of private Islamic schools in Thailand's Deep South is neither accidental nor purely administrative. Rather, it is the result of a holistic, strategic alignment across four interdependent domains: critically self-reflection, developing culturally responsive teachers, promoting an inclusive environment, and engaging stakeholders. The central finding is that effective leadership in this region is contextualized as it must

be culturally rooted by honoring the community's Islamic identity and utilizing local heritage as an educational resource. Simultaneously, it must be globally adaptive by pursuing high educational quality, integrity, and future-ready competencies.

The success demonstrated by these school directors confirms that culturally responsive leadership, when operationalized through a blend of transformational vision, instructional pedagogy, and distributed collaboration, serves as the vital mechanism for maintaining school resilience, fostering a profound sense of inclusivity and belonging, and ultimately preparing students to navigate diverse worlds while remaining firmly grounded in their heritage. The conclusion is that leadership authenticity and ethical conduct, born

from critical self-reflection, is the indispensable prerequisite for translating culturally responsive theory into equitable and sustainable practice.

By focusing on practical implications, Islamic schools in Thailand's Deep South can intentionally build a pipeline of leaders who are ethically grounded, instructionally strong, and strategically capable of navigating the complex demands of a multicultural, globalized world while remaining rooted in their local heritage. Future research can move from documenting effective leadership practice to creating evidence-based policies and training programs that foster sustainable equity in Thailand's multicultural educational landscape in other regions.

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