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DEVELOPING CROSS-CULTURAL LEADERSHIP: A MIXED METHODS STUDY OF THAI BORDER SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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Abstract

This study investigates cross-cultural leadership practices and professional development pathways of school administrators operating within Thailand's complex, multicultural border region. Employing a robust mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, the research comprehensively evaluates critical leadership dynamics within the Mae Cha Rao School Group in Tak Province. The quantitative phase surveyed 62 administrators using a validated instrument measuring four core dimensions: transformational leadership, empathy in work practice, communication competence, and trust-building. Descriptive results indicated a high overall capacity for cross-cultural leadership, with empathy and trust-building as the most prominent strengths among school leaders. Conversely, communication competence ranked the lowest, revealing distinct operational challenges in successfully navigating linguistic boundaries and diverse community expectations. To address these specific gaps, the qualitative phase utilized structured interviews with five educational experts to formulate targeted, context-specific developmental strategies. Recommendations strongly emphasize continuous cultural immersion, empathy-based professional training, flexible bilingual communication channels, and the establishment of highly transparent administrative systems. Integrating these empirical findings demonstrates that effective management in diverse environments requires balancing emotional intelligence with systemic cultural adaptability to promote educational equity across ASEAN school systems.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural School Leadership, Intercultural Communication Competence, Culturally Responsive Administration, Mixed-Methods Educational Research, Multicultural Border Schools

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, globalization has profoundly reshaped political, economic, and cultural landscapes worldwide, generating unprecedented levels of interdependence and multicultural interaction. Advances in transportation, communication, and digital technology have dissolved many traditional boundaries of time and space, allowing people, goods, and ideas to circulate freely across borders. These developments have fostered collaboration and competition at both regional and global levels, transforming how institutions function in increasingly diverse environments (Kunaviktikul & Jaiwilai, 2022). While globalization stimulates innovation and exchange, it also poses complex challenges for governance and leadership, requiring institutions to navigate cultural, linguistic, and social diversity in equitable and inclusive ways. Education, as a fundamental driver of societal progress, occupies a central position in this transformation. Schools are not only centers of academic learning but also vital arenas for nurturing cultural awareness, empathy, and global citizenship.

Educational institutions in the twenty-first century thus face the dual task of promoting academic excellence while fostering intercultural understanding. Effective leadership has become a decisive factor in meeting this challenge. Leaders must cultivate environments that recognize diversity as a resource rather than a barrier, ensuring that every learner, regardless of background, has equitable access to educational opportunities. Thailand provides a compelling context for examining this issue. Strategically situated at the heart of Southeast Asia, the country is both a cultural crossroads and a regional leader in education reform. Under the ASEAN framework, the Thai government's "Thailand 4.0" initiative promotes innovation, technological advancement, and human capital development as foundations for national competitiveness. This policy emphasizes that Thailand's rich cultural and biological diversity constitutes a core national asset and a source of sustainable growth (Office of the Education Council, 2017). Within this policy context, education serves not only as a means of knowledge acquisition but also as an instrument for strengthening cultural understanding, mutual respect, and social cohesion. Schools are envisioned as inclusive communities in which cultural pluralism becomes a shared strength and a catalyst for innovation.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in translating these ideals into practice. In multicultural educational environments, effective leaders must demonstrate competencies that combine empathy, ethical judgment, and the ability to inspire a collective vision. Theories of cross-cultural leadership identify communication, trust, and transformational influence as essential skills for uniting diverse groups around common goals (Karuna et al., 2014). Dedwongsa & Lapchareon (2023) also emphasize attentiveness, conflict resolution, and trust-building as central to leadership effectiveness in multicultural educational settings. These qualities enable administrators to bridge cultural divides, prevent misunderstandings, and promote a sense of belonging, all of which are critical for teacher motivation, institutional stability, and student engagement. Research further demonstrates that cross-cultural leadership enhances organizational commitment and supports academic and social development among students (Khalifa et al., 2016; Office of the Education Council, 2017).

The Mae Cha Rao School Group in Tak Province, western Thailand, provides a rich and complex setting for examining these dynamics. Tak's border with Myanmar has historically served as a gateway for trade, migration, and cultural exchange, resulting in an exceptionally diverse population that includes Karen, Lawa, Hmong, Shan, Burmese, and Chinese communities. Despite this diversity, socioeconomic disparities and linguistic barriers remain significant challenges. The Mae Cha Rao School Group, comprising small rural schools dispersed across mountainous terrain, illustrates the difficulties of ensuring equitable education in such multicultural and geographically isolated contexts. School administrators must confront limited infrastructure, resource shortages, and communication barriers while simultaneously maintaining academic quality and public confidence. These realities demand leadership that

extends beyond administrative efficiency to encompass intercultural sensitivity, contextual adaptability, and problem-solving rooted in local realities.

Culturally responsive leadership thus becomes essential for educational success in border-region schools. Leadership that neglects cultural diversity risks perpetuating inequality and social fragmentation, whereas culturally responsive leadership empowers communities, promotes collaboration, and strengthens institutional resilience (Khalifa et al., 2016). This approach aligns with global frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirms that every child has the right to an education that respects their cultural identity and background (Office of the Education Council, 2023). Within this framework, school administrators must balance managerial responsibilities, such as resource allocation, curriculum management, and staff supervision, with strategies that foster empathy, trust, and shared purpose across cultural boundaries. Leadership practices that incorporate emotional intelligence and ethical awareness can transform schools into inclusive learning environments that promote equity and collective well-being.

Transformational leadership, which focuses on inspiration, empowerment, and moral purpose, has been identified as particularly effective in multicultural educational settings (Walker & Shuangye, 2007). Emotional intelligence allows leaders to respond empathetically to staff and student needs, while cultural adaptability enables them to negotiate differences constructively. Integrating these qualities enables administrators to transform cultural diversity from a potential obstacle into a strategic advantage that enhances creativity, learning outcomes, and institutional cohesion (Office of the Education Council, 2017). In rural and border communities such as Mae Cha Rao, transformational and culturally responsive leadership practices are vital to building trust among teachers and parents, engaging ethnic minority communities, and ensuring that education remains relevant and inclusive.

This study is designed to explore these leadership dynamics in depth. Specifically, it seeks to examine the cross-cultural leadership practices of school administrators within the Mae Cha Rao School Group and to identify developmental approaches that can further strengthen their leadership capacities. By integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, the study aims to produce a comprehensive understanding of both existing leadership behaviors and the strategies needed to enhance them. The dual focus of this research, diagnosing current leadership practices and proposing development pathways, contributes both theoretically and practically to the discourse on educational leadership in multicultural contexts. Empirically, it provides evidence of how Thai school leaders navigate cross-cultural challenges in a geographically and culturally complex border region. Practically, it identifies targeted professional development strategies to support administrators working in resource-constrained yet culturally rich environments.

The findings are expected to inform educational policy, leadership training, and future reform efforts aimed at promoting inclusive and high-quality education throughout Thailand and the wider ASEAN community. Ultimately, the case of the Mae Cha Rao School Group reflects broader transformations in educational leadership driven by globalization and migration. Contemporary school leaders are not merely administrators; they are facilitators of cultural understanding, ethical collaboration, and social unity. As education systems worldwide continue to adapt to growing cultural complexity, competencies such as empathy, adaptability, and intercultural communication have emerged as essential hallmarks of effective leadership. In recognizing and cultivating these qualities, this research underscores the need for leadership models that are not only globally informed but also locally grounded, reflecting the unique cultural realities of Thailand's diverse educational landscape.

Literature Review

Cross-Cultural Leadership

Concept and Importance, Cross-cultural leadership has emerged as a vital area of scholarly inquiry in response to globalization, migration, and the expanding interconnectedness of societies. In today's diverse environments, leaders are required not only to manage but also to inspire individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds toward common goals (Bryk & Schneider, 2004). This concept extends beyond administrative expertise; it demands cultural intelligence, adaptive capacity, and the ability to navigate complex human dynamics. Scholars have consistently emphasized that effective cross-cultural leadership involves cultural awareness, flexibility, and inclusivity. Leaders must recognize and respect differences in values, communication styles, and social norms, transforming diversity into organizational strength rather than a source of division (Liddell, 2005). Tschannen-Moran & Hoy (2000) identified attentiveness, trust-building, transformational influence, effective communication, and conflict resolution as the essential qualities that enable leaders to bridge cultural divides and foster cohesive organizational cultures. These competencies position cross-cultural leaders as mediators who balance organizational performance with human sensitivity, ensuring that diversity contributes to unity and institutional growth.

Cross-Cultural Leadership in Education

In educational settings, cross-cultural leadership plays an especially critical role. Schools have become increasingly multicultural environments where administrators engage daily with teachers, students, and community members representing diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities. Walker & Shuangye (2007) observed that educational leaders who demonstrate cultural empathy, intercultural communication competence, and participatory decision-making are more effective in fostering inclusive school cultures. Similarly, Leithwood et al. (2020) confirmed that effective school leadership directly influences student learning outcomes, making cultural competence an indispensable component of educational success in pluralistic societies. Leadership practices grounded in mutual respect, equity, and collaboration have been shown to enhance teacher morale and student engagement, contributing to sustainable school improvement and community trust.

The Thai Context

The significance of cross-cultural leadership is particularly evident in Thailand, a nation characterized by ethnic diversity and regional disparities. Within the ASEAN framework, Thailand's border provinces, especially Tak, illustrate the complex realities of educational leadership in multicultural contexts. Administrators in these areas must confront linguistic diversity, socioeconomic inequality, and differing community expectations (Kunaviktikul & Jaiwilai, 2022). Leadership strategies that emphasize collaboration, inclusion, and cultural responsiveness are therefore essential for promoting educational harmony and equity. The Mae Cha Rao School Group, located in the mountainous region of Tak Province, represents a distinctive case for analyzing these dynamics. The area's challenging topography, limited infrastructure, and ethnolinguistic diversity, including Karen, Lawa, Hmong, Shan, Burmese, and Chinese communities, create both opportunities and constraints for effective school management (Yongyuen & Choeybal, 2025). School administrators must balance efficiency and accountability with sensitivity to cultural contexts to ensure that educational services remain equitable, inclusive, and culturally relevant.

Leadership Practices and Local Adaptation

Empirical studies on Thai educational leadership underscore the importance of adaptive, participatory, and culturally responsive models. Wittayasin (2018) found that administrators who practice participatory governance, adopt culturally responsive pedagogy, and encourage community engagement achieve greater success in diverse settings. Such practices promote trust and cooperation between schools and their surrounding communities. In practice, cross-

cultural leadership within Mae Cha Rao schools requires not only administrative competence but also a sustained commitment to empathy, transparency, and open communication. Administrators must engage actively with local communities, respect traditional customs, and build collaborative partnerships among teachers, parents, and community leaders. These efforts help create inclusive learning environments where diversity is valued as a resource for mutual learning and development rather than as a barrier to progress.

Research Method

This study employed a two-phase, mixed-methods sequential explanatory design aimed at (a) examining the current state of cross-cultural leadership among school administrators and (b) identifying appropriate development approaches for the Mae Cha Rao School Group, Tak Province. The design was selected to ensure that quantitative results could be explained and enriched through qualitative insights, producing a comprehensive understanding of leadership practices in a multicultural educational context (DeVellis, 2017).

Phase 1: Quantitative Survey of Cross-Cultural Leadership

Participants and Sampling: The target population comprised all school administrators working in special educational areas of Tak Province during the 2024 academic year. Using purposive sampling, 62 administrators were selected as respondents. The sampling criteria focused on administrators operating in culturally diverse, resource-constrained school environments, consistent with the study's objectives. This approach enabled the inclusion of participants whose professional experiences aligned with the multicultural challenges in Mae Cha Rao.

Research Instrument: Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire designed to assess cross-cultural leadership behaviors. The instrument consisted of two main sections: (1) demographic information (gender, position, and years of experience) and (2) 31 behavioral items across four leadership dimensions synthesized from prior research: transformational leadership (8 items), empathy in work practice (7 items), communication competence (7 items), and trust-building (9 items) (Liddell, 2005). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("very low") to 5 ("very high").

Content Validity and Reliability: Instrument construction followed established guidelines for scale development (DeVellis, 2017). Following the initial drafting stage, the questionnaire was reviewed by academic advisors to ensure clarity, content coverage, and alignment with theoretical constructs. Subsequently, three experts in educational leadership evaluated the alignment between each item and its intended objective. The Item Objective Congruence (IOC) indices for all items met or exceeded the .50 threshold (range = .67-1.00), confirming satisfactory content validity (Lynn, 1986). A pilot test was conducted with 30 administrators outside the main sample, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha of .867, indicating high internal consistency for the overall scale (Bryk & Schneider, 2004).

Data Collection and Analysis: The finalized questionnaire was distributed electronically via Google Forms. All 62 questionnaires were returned completed, yielding a 100% response rate. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics with a statistical software package. Demographic data were summarized as frequencies and percentages, while leadership scores were analyzed using means and standard deviations (SDs). Interpretation of mean values followed a five-level classification system ranging from "very low" to "very high," consistent with established Thai behavioral research conventions (Yongyuen & Choeybal, 2025). These analyses addressed Objective 1 by providing a detailed profile of cross-cultural leadership, both overall and by dimension.

Phase 2: Qualitative Expert Interviews on Development Approaches

Participants and Sampling: To fulfill Objective 2, five educational experts were selected through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria required participants to (a) hold at least a master's degree in education or an equivalent field, (b) serve in a senior leadership role such

as deputy director or school director, and (c) have a minimum of five years of experience managing schools in multicultural contexts.

Interview Protocol and Data Collection: A structured interview schedule was developed based on the quantitative findings from Phase 1, focusing on the lowest-scoring practices across the four leadership dimensions. The protocol contained two sections: (1) background information and (2) four open-ended questions, one for each dimension: transformational leadership, empathy, communication competence, and trust-building. Interviews were conducted individually, with participants' consent obtained prior to recording. Responses were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness: The qualitative data were analyzed using a content analysis approach (Krippendorff, 2013). Transcripts were systematically coded to identify emerging themes and categories, which were subsequently synthesized into practical development approaches corresponding to the four leadership dimensions. Triangulation across expert perspectives, an audit trail of coding decisions, and peer debriefing procedures were used to enhance the analysis's credibility and trustworthiness.

Results from Phase 1 established a baseline profile of cross-cultural leadership among school administrators, identifying both strengths and areas requiring development. Building upon these findings, Phase 2 generated expert-validated strategies tailored to the specific needs and contextual challenges of the Mae Cha Rao School Group. The integration of quantitative and qualitative results produced a comprehensive, context-sensitive set of recommendations to strengthen cross-cultural leadership competencies in culturally diverse educational environments.

Ethical Considerations

All participants received written and verbal information outlining the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality protocols. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation. All data were stored securely, and only aggregated or de-identified results were presented in reporting to protect participant anonymity.

Research Results

The study surveyed sixty-two school administrators from the Mae Cha Rao School Group in Tak Province to examine cross-cultural leadership and identify strategies for its development. Of these participants, 51 were male (82.26%), and 11 were female (17.74%), revealing a substantial gender imbalance, with men holding most administrative positions. Fifty-two respondents (83.87%) served as school directors, eight (12.90%) as deputy directors, and two (3.23%) were teachers temporarily assigned to administrative duties. Regarding professional experience, 28 administrators (45.16%) had fewer than 5 years of experience, 24 (38.71%) reported 5 to 10 years, and 10 (16.13%) had more than 10 years. The demographic pattern, therefore, reflects a leadership structure dominated by male administrators who are relatively young and managing schools in culturally diverse and geographically challenging areas.

Descriptive statistical analysis showed that the overall level of cross-cultural leadership was rated highest (Mean = 4.52, SD = 0.29). This finding indicates that administrators generally demonstrate strong cross-cultural leadership competencies across four dimensions: transformational leadership, empathy in work practice, communication competence, and trust-building. Empathy scored highest (Mean = 4.65, SD = 0.37), followed by trust-building (Mean = 4.62, SD = 0.30) and transformational leadership (Mean = 4.51, SD = 0.31). Communication competence had the lowest mean (Mean = 4.29, SD = 0.41), which, although still high, was weaker than the other domains. These results suggest that administrators excel in interpersonal and ethical capacities but require more systematic development of intercultural communication skills to foster deeper collaboration and understanding in diverse educational contexts.

Within the transformational-leadership dimension, the overall mean score of 4.51 (SD = 0.31) confirms very strong performance. Administrators most strongly endorsed a commitment to creating more efficient administrative systems (Mean = 4.81, SD = 0.47), confidence in leading schools toward positive change (Mean = 4.77, SD = 0.52), and support for innovative ideas that foster diversity and improvement (Mean = 4.71, SD = 0.49). The lowest-rated indicator, ability to adapt to current societal change (Mean = 4.18, SD = 0.66), reveals that while leaders are visionary and improvement-oriented, they would benefit from additional training to strengthen their responsiveness to rapid educational and social transformation.

Empathy emerged as the strongest leadership attribute, with an overall mean of 4.65 (SD = 0.37). Administrators scored highest for listening equally to all personnel without discrimination (Mean = 4.76, SD = 0.46), showing consistent care and concern (Mean = 4.71, SD = 0.49), and assisting others in collaborative work (Mean = 4.66, SD = 0.62). The lowest mean, recognizing the capabilities of every staff member (Mean = 4.52, SD = 0.56), though still high, points to a need for greater inclusivity in professional recognition. This emphasis on empathy demonstrates the administrators' interpersonal sensitivity, fairness, and commitment to equity, qualities essential for inclusive learning environments within multicultural schools. Communication competence remained the weakest dimension (Mean = 4.29, SD = 0.41). The highest-rated indicator was facilitating collaboration while respecting cultural differences (Mean = 4.61, SD = 0.52), followed by communicating in a friendly, open manner with culturally diverse personnel (Mean = 4.47, SD = 0.69) and using clear, appropriate interpersonal communication (Mean = 4.32, SD = 0.59). The lowest-scoring item, conveying knowledge and ideas directly and effectively to culturally diverse staff (Mean = 4.03, SD = 0.54), highlights the challenge of intercultural clarity. Although administrators display goodwill and openness, they may lack advanced strategies for reducing misunderstandings. Targeted professional learning in intercultural communication and adaptive messaging would help address this gap.

Trust-building ranked second overall (Mean = 4.62, SD = 0.30). The highest-rated items were working with honesty, transparency, and accountability (Mean = 4.81, SD = 0.43), monitoring staff performance to maximize effectiveness (M = 4.79, SD = 0.44), and building confidence in teamwork for institutional success (Mean = 4.71, SD = 0.49). The lowest mean, with clear task completion timelines (Mean = 4.35, SD = 0.51), indicates minor weaknesses in procedural clarity and time management. Overall, administrators exhibit strong moral integrity and interpersonal trust, though improved planning and communication of expectations could enhance institutional efficiency.

The second phase of the study explored development approaches to strengthen these leadership competencies through structured interviews with five educational experts with extensive experience in multicultural school contexts. Qualitative content analysis identified four corresponding dimensions: transformational leadership, empathy, communication competence, and trust-building, and yielded context-specific recommendations designed to reinforce leadership capacity in culturally diverse educational environments.

Experts emphasized that effective transformational leadership in multicultural schools demands adaptability, inclusivity, and sensitivity to community diversity. Administrators were encouraged to collaborate with local staff to orient new teachers to community customs, traditions, and norms. Active participation in local festivals, religious ceremonies, and public events was recommended to enhance cultural understanding and mutual trust. Promoting innovation and reflective practice among staff was also identified as vital, as it allows schools to respond dynamically to evolving educational needs while staying aligned with local values. Empathy was recognized as a foundational element of leadership success. Experts recommended ongoing professional development programs workshops, reflective dialogues, and peer-learning activities that strengthen emotional intelligence and interpersonal awareness.

Inclusive management, such as delegating tasks according to staff strengths and cultural contexts, fosters fairness and engagement. Maintaining an open mindset and valuing diverse viewpoints were described as key to creating supportive, equitable school climates in which empathy becomes an actionable leadership practice.

Communication competence was described as both a persistent challenge and a developmental priority. Experts proposed using bilingual staff, interpreters, or cultural mediators to bridge linguistic divides and improve clarity. Diversifying communication channels through in-person meetings, digital platforms, and written notices was also advised to accommodate varied preferences. Leaders were urged to adapt their tone and format to cultural expectations, recognizing that some groups favor formal consultation while others prefer informal dialogue. Such flexibility minimizes misunderstandings and strengthens institutional cohesion.

Trust-building was identified as the foundation of sustainable cross-cultural leadership. Experts recommended establishing transparent schedules, clear role definitions, and explicit expectations aligned with staff expertise. Regular feedback, constructive evaluation, and acknowledgment of contributions were viewed as essential mechanisms for ensuring accountability and fairness. Above all, administrators must embody honesty, consistency, and ethical integrity to sustain confidence and credibility. By modeling these behaviors, leaders cultivate cohesive school communities characterized by collaboration and mutual respect.

Taken together, these findings reveal that administrators in the Mae Cha Rao School Group exhibit high cross-cultural leadership capacity, particularly in empathy and trust, yet would benefit from targeted development in communication and adaptive leadership. The integration of quantitative and qualitative results provides a robust foundation for leadership training programs emphasizing intercultural communication, participatory governance, and culturally responsive management. Through transparent practices, reflective learning, and authentic community engagement, school leaders can advance inclusivity and institutional effectiveness within Thailand's multicultural educational landscape.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study aimed to examine the cross-cultural leadership of school administrators in the Mae Cha Rao School Group, Tak Province, and to identify development approaches that could strengthen their leadership competencies. Integrating quantitative and qualitative findings provided a holistic understanding of the current leadership context and the strategies necessary for sustainable advancement. The quantitative phase revealed that administrators demonstrated high to very high levels of cross-cultural leadership across four core dimensions: transformational leadership, empathy in work practice, communication competence, and trust-building. Empathy and trust recorded the highest mean scores (Mean = 4.65, SD = 0.58; Mean = 4.62, SD = 0.61, respectively), whereas communication competence yielded the lowest (Mean = 4.29). These results indicate that administrators excel in cultivating inclusive, respectful relationships yet face persistent challenges in communicating effectively across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This pattern corresponds with prior international research, which identifies communication as a central difficulty in multicultural leadership (Karuna et al., 2014).

The strong performance in empathy and trust highlights administrators' capacity to build equitable and supportive school climates. Data revealed that leaders listen attentively to staff without bias, encourage professional development, and uphold honesty and transparency in management practices. These patterns align with the work of Walker & Shuangye (2007) and Leithwood et al. (2020), who assert that empathy and trust are foundational to effective leadership in culturally diverse educational settings. Trust, in particular, contributes to organizational health, collaboration, and teacher commitment (Khalifa et al., 2016). In the Mae Cha Rao context, where multiethnic populations coexist amid limited resources, empathy and

trust function as the social glue that sustains cooperation, mitigates conflict, and strengthens collective engagement. High empathy scores also suggest that administrators embody inclusive values consistent with Thailand's national educational goals, emphasizing fairness, dignity, and respect among all stakeholders.

Transformational leadership also achieved a high overall score, though administrators exhibited relative weakness in adaptability to rapid social and educational change. This limitation reflects a global leadership challenge: balancing innovation with cultural sensitivity. Bass & Riggio (2006) argue that transformational leaders must combine visionary thinking with flexibility to navigate cultural complexity. Similarly, findings from the GLOBE study emphasize adaptability and future orientation as vital competencies for leaders operating in diverse environments (Liddell, 2005). In border provinces such as Tak, where communities differ significantly in language, religion, and socioeconomic status, adaptive leadership often determines whether reforms are accepted or resisted. Administrators capable of interpreting national education policies through local cultural perspectives are better positioned to secure stakeholder commitment and implement sustainable improvements in school management and instruction.

The qualitative phase expanded upon these findings by identifying practical strategies for developing administrators' competencies. Experts emphasized the importance of cultural immersion in strengthening adaptability and community connection. They recommended that administrators engage with local communities, involve teachers and staff in cultural orientation programs, and participate personally in community and religious events. These actions build cultural understanding, increase credibility, and enhance mutual trust between schools and residents. This recommendation is consistent with Banks (2015), who advocates for integrating local cultural knowledge into school practices as a foundation for inclusivity and relevance in multicultural education. The experts' insights suggest that effective leadership in such settings must move beyond technical administration to embrace cultural empathy, responsiveness, and authentic collaboration.

Empathy development was further recognized as a critical aspect of cross-cultural leadership. Experts proposed continuous professional learning initiatives focused on interpersonal awareness, reflective practice, and inclusive delegation. Activities such as workshops, mentoring, and peer learning were cited as effective in promoting perspective-taking and open-mindedness among administrators. These strategies align with Wittayasin (2018), who found that empathy-based leadership enhances morale, reduces cultural misunderstandings, and strengthens collective purpose. By linking emotional intelligence with everyday professional practice, administrators can model compassion, fairness, and integrity, thereby fostering a school culture built on trust and respect. Empathetic leadership not only supports staff cohesion but also promotes student engagement and parental involvement, which are critical components of an inclusive educational ecosystem.

Regarding communication competence, the lowest-rated dimension requires targeted, contextually appropriate interventions. Experts suggested employing bilingual or community-based staff as intermediaries to bridge linguistic gaps and enhance clarity. They also advised adopting multiple communication channels, including face-to-face meetings, digital tools, and written correspondence, to accommodate varying preferences and levels of technological access. Tailoring communication styles to the discourse norms and cultural expectations of specific groups was highlighted as equally important. For instance, some communities may favor structured and formal interactions, while others respond more positively to informal dialogue and participatory exchanges. Such adaptability minimizes miscommunication, promotes understanding, and reinforces a cohesive organizational culture, directly addressing the weaknesses identified in the quantitative phase.

Trust-building was viewed as another essential domain of leadership development. Experts emphasized transparency, consistency, and accountability as fundamental to sustaining professional relationships. Administrators were encouraged to establish clear work calendars, define timelines, and assign responsibilities aligned with each staff member's expertise. Regular performance monitoring, constructive feedback, and public recognition of achievement were identified as effective mechanisms for fostering fairness and institutional trust. These practices reflect Dedwongsa & Lapchareon's (2023) assertion that relational trust is grounded in shared expectations, demonstrated competence, and procedural clarity. In multicultural school contexts, trust is not merely a product of personal relationships but also of organizational structures that ensure equality and integrity in decision-making processes. Therefore, trust-building must be conceptualized as both a moral commitment and an administrative framework that sustains long-term collaboration.

Taken together, the findings of this study present a refined model of cross-cultural leadership that integrates interpersonal, ethical, and systemic dimensions. Administrators displayed strong emotional and relational competencies, particularly empathy and trust, yet still require further development in communication and adaptive leadership. The convergence between quantitative and qualitative results reinforces the credibility of the conclusions. It reflects an emerging paradigm of Thai educational leadership that merges global theories of transformational and cross-cultural leadership with community-based, culturally grounded practices. Practically, leadership development initiatives should prioritize intercultural communication, participatory governance, and adaptive problem-solving through experiential learning and partnerships with community stakeholders. Transparency, continuous reflection, and sustained engagement with local cultures will further strengthen institutional trust, inclusivity, and responsiveness. Theoretically, this study contributes to the contextualization of international leadership frameworks within Thailand's border-region schools, illustrating that effective leadership in multicultural settings depends on culturally responsive strategies that honor local knowledge and values. Ultimately, these findings extend transformational leadership theory into environments characterized by diversity, limited resources, and geographic isolation, offering valuable insights for educational reform and leadership development across Thailand and the ASEAN region.

The integrated discussion of findings indicates that the development of cross-cultural leadership among school administrators extends beyond individual abilities to include institutional and community engagement that promotes inclusivity and cultural responsiveness. Effective leadership in multicultural schools depends on aligning personal competencies with organizational systems that respect cultural diversity (Leithwood et al., 2020). Consistent with the quantitative results from Phase 1, experts affirmed that administrators in the Mae Cha Rao School Group exhibit strong empathy and trust-building but comparatively lower communication competence. This pattern, consistent with findings from Southeast Asian studies, underscores the need for contextual communication training to enhance intercultural understanding (Dedwongsa & Lapchareon, 2023). Emotional intelligence, participatory governance, and reflective practice were emphasized as essential for motivating and empowering diverse school teams (Wittayasin, 2018). Experts also recommended institutionalizing leadership development through inclusive policies, mentoring programs, and partnerships that integrate local traditions and languages (Office of the Education Council, 2023). These findings underscore the importance of culturally responsive leadership across Thailand and ASEAN, promoting equity, social cohesion, and sustainable educational development.

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