Culturally Responsive Leadership in Northern Thailand's Schools: Insights and Practices from School Principals

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objectives: Thailand's educational reform emphasizing decentralization and area-based management has highlighted the need for culturally responsive leadership approaches. Northern Thailand serves over 935,000 students from ethnic and indigenous groups including Karen (44.8%), Hmong (16.2%), Akha (8.5%), and 50+ other ethnicities, alongside over 145,000 stateless students and migrant workers' children. With more than 70 local and ethnic languages represented in Thai schools, principals face significant challenges managing culturally responsive education. This qualitative research aimed to: 1) study perspectives and life experiences of school principals demonstrating culturally responsive educational leadership; 2) analyze actual practices reflecting this leadership approach; and 3) develop comprehensive recommendations for transforming educational leadership paradigms.

Methodology: The study employed a qualitative descriptive-interpretive approach with multiple case sites over six months (January-June 2024). Twenty principals were purposively selected, eachwith at least five years ofexperience managing culturally diverse schools and demonstrated achievements in culturally responsive education. Demographics: 60% male, 40% female; ages 45-60; 75% master's degrees, 25% doctoral; 80% specialized in educational administration; averaging 12.5 years principal experience. Schools varied: 55% small (<119 students), 35% medium (120-719), 10% large (720-1,679), across seven northern provinces. Schools served diverse populations: Thai lowlanders (100%), Karen (60%), Hmong (50%), Akha (40%), Lahu (30%), Tai Yai (25%), Tai Lue (20%). Data collection included in-depth interviews (45-60 minutes, 12 follow-ups), systematic observation (2-3 visits per school, 4-6 hours each), and document analysis (174 documents, 8-9 per school). Content analysis generated 150 initial codes refined into 28 subcategories through constant comparative analysis with triangulation.

Main Results: Successful principals demonstrated three characteristics: 90% viewed cultural diversity as social capital, 70% had personal diversity experience, 95% were motivated by educational equity. Five leadership dimensions emerged: creating diversity-conducive environments (anti-discrimination policies 100%, cultural corners 90%, multilingual signage 80%); developing culturally responsive curriculum (local curricula 95%, bilingual teaching 80%, flexible assessment 70%); building community

collaboration (parent networks 100%, community experts 95%, inclusive committees 90%); developing teachers' cultural competencies (multicultural training 90%, diverse learner strategies 85%, study visits 75%); implementing continuous assessment (stakeholder evaluation 85%, culturally responsive indicators 80%, context-appropriate criteria 75%). Success factors included clear vision (90%), community cooperation (95%), and sustained commitment (85%). Primary challenges included: resource limitations (90%), personnel shortages (85%), and attitudinal barriers (80%).

Discussions: Findings aligned with international asset-based diversity research while demonstrating unique contextual adaptations to Thailand's multicultural landscape. Notably, exceptionally high community collaboration implementation rates (80-100%) suggest Thai principals developed uniquely effective culturally responsive engagement approaches surpassing Western contexts. The tension between centralized educational policies and localized culturally responsive approaches emerged as a significant systemic challenge, reflecting the broader centralization-localization dilemma documented in Southeast Asian education systems.

Conclusion: Educational leadership paradigm transformation recommendations encompassed five interconnected areas: developing leaders' asset-based mindsets valuing diversity, creating supportive policy systems, implementing culturally integrated curriculum frameworks, enhancing personnel cultural competencies, and establishing continuous assessment practices. These recommendations collectively offer promising pathways for Thai education to more effectively serve its diverse student populations while respectfully leveraging cultural differences as valuable educational assets.

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Introduction

The educational reform movement in Thailand over the past decade, which has emphasized educational decentralization and area-based education management, has significantly impacted the thinking patterns of school principals in Thai society. The image of educational leaders as technocrats, characterized by conservatism and resistance to change, has been challenged by the transition to transformative leadership frameworks that are ready to lead fundamental changes (Hallinger & Lee, 2014; Lao & Nakyam, 2024). Meanwhile, social, cultural, economic, political contexts, and ideological changes in the globalized society, as well as the diverse backgrounds of students in terms of race, class, ethnicity, gender, language, and culture, have led to questions about what leadership theories are appropriate for contemporary Thai society and how these theories can be concretely implemented in developing educational leaders, especially principals at the basic education level (Marshall & Khalifa, 2018; Sungtong & Maxcy, 2010).

Addressing these questions presents challenges for educational administration in the current era. Since the 1990s, leadership theories have been presented from increasingly diverse perspectives, and the nature of leadership theories has shifted from having clear and stable

structures to presenting dynamic and process-oriented perspectives (Kulophas & Hallinger, 2021). Consequently, contemporary perspectives on leadership theories attempt to understand and respect diverse cultures, promote cooperation between individuals, and encourage leaders and organizations to be socially responsible. The impact of leadership theory reform has led to new paradigms of knowledge in this field, such as transformative leadership, community-based leadership, social justice leadership, critical curriculum leadership, and culturally responsive leadership (Sungtong & Maxcy, 2010; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017).

However, applying leadership theories appropriately to school situations and contexts remains a challenge for school principals. Although new paradigms of leadership theories have been presented in various forms, school principals in Northern Thailand, for instance, should demonstrate leadership that understands and respects the differences of communities with specific characteristics given the diversity of geography, race, ethnicity, language, culture, and practices in this region (Leepreecha & Sakboon, 2021). School principals should demonstrate leadership that responds to culture, language, and religion, has a deep understanding of community contexts, collaborates with teachers to help students from diverse backgrounds succeed academically, and builds strong relationships between schools and communities (Manokarn, 2017; Lao & Nakyam, 2024).

Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL) is a concept developed from Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP). This leadership approach integrates philosophical principles, practical strategies, and administrative systems to create inclusive environments for culturally diverse students. It emphasizes high academic expectations, incorporates community cultural knowledge into the curriculum, builds critical awareness of societal inequities, and establishes structures that empower diverse families and students (Johnson, 2014). These elements create a leadership framework that treats cultural diversity as an educational asset.

Culturally responsive leadership has gained significant attention in international educational research as demonstrated by several influential studies. Dugan et al. (2012) documented how a principal transformed an underperforming school by rebuilding relationships with indigenous communities and leveraging their cultural knowledge. Similarly, Lopez (2016) examined fourteen school leaders in culturally diverse Canadian schools, identifying critical practices and challenges while emphasizing that leaders must develop capacities to work effectively across cultural differences in both urban and rural settings. These findings align with Marshall and Khalifa's (2018) research on how instructional leadership can make education more inclusive for minority students and Niesche's (2024) work on integrating indigenous perspectives to improve community-school relations.

These international studies reveal how culturally responsive leadership transcends national boundaries while sharing common principles: respectful engagement with community cultural knowledge, relationship-building across differences, and transforming educational practices to serve diverse populations equitably. Such approaches have proven effective in creating culturally inclusive learning environments by addressing systemic inequities through leadership that values diverse cultural perspectives. These principles are particularly relevant for Thai educational leaders working in multicultural contexts, where similar challenges of balancing centralized educational systems with local cultural responsiveness must be navigated.

In the Thai context, the government has prioritized education that responds to diversity. According to data from the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) in 2022, there are over 935,000 students from ethnic and indigenous groups distributed across schools nationwide, especially in the northern and northeastern regions (Durongkaveroj, 2023). These include students from major ethnic groups such as Karen (44.8%), Hmong (16.2%), Akha (8.5%), and more than 50 other ethnic groups. Additionally, there are over 145,000 stateless students and children of migrant workers studying in the Thai education system. This diversity

also includes linguistic differences, with more than 70 local and ethnic languages used in the Thai education system. These situations reflect the challenges faced by school administrators in managing education that must respond effectively to cultural diversity.

From a review of literature related to community-based education and education that responds to cultural diversity in Thai society (Office of the Education Council, 2016), it was found that most research focuses on teaching and learning, curriculum development, and community participation. However, there is a lack of studies on educational leadership, which is a key mechanism for driving education that responds to cultural diversity and achieve tangible results, particularly studies that would understand the perspectives, concepts, and experiences of successful school administrators in such educational management

In addition, a preliminary field study conducted through interviews with five school principals in the northern region (January–March 2024) revealed interesting points regarding the expression of leadership that responds to cultural diversity. Specifically, most school principals had to adjust their thinking and working methods from traditional bureaucratic approaches that emphasized top-down directives to participatory work that prioritizes listening to community voices and respecting the cultural identities of learners. The preliminary study also found that school principals who succeeded in managing education that responds to cultural diversity often had personal experiences related to working in areas with cultural diversity or had backgrounds related to local communities, giving them understanding and sensitivity to different cultural dimensions. For example, a school principal in a border area with experience working with ethnic communities could integrate local wisdom into the curriculum in a harmonious and natural way.

Recent research on Thai small school policy by Lao and Nakyam (2024) revealed how economics-centered perspectives and narrow achievement metrics have neglected the community value of these schools, highlighting the need for leaders who can effectively "manage from above and lead from below." This aligns with international culturally responsive leadership research by Dugan et al. (2012), Lopez (2016), Marshall and Khalifa (2018), and Niesche (2024), which collectively demonstrates how such leadership approaches can transform educational outcomes through community engagement, cultural knowledge integration, and addressing systemic inequities. These studies share common principles that transcend national boundaries: respectful engagement with community cultural assets, relationship-building across differences, and adapting educational practices to serve diverse populations equitably - principles particularly relevant for Thai educational leaders navigating multicultural contexts.

This research thus aims to study the perspectives, concepts, and practices of Northern Thai school principals who demonstrate culturally responsive leadership, with three specific objectives: 1) to examine the perspectives and life experiences that shape these principals' approaches to cultural diversity; 2) to analyze their actual leadership practices in responding to cultural diversity; and 3) to develop recommendations for transforming educational leadership paradigms in the Thai context. By connecting educational administration theory with critical curriculum leadership concepts (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017), this study creates a framework for understanding these phenomena in real contexts, ultimately contributing to policy recommendations that can transform educational leadership development to better serve Thailand's diverse student populations.

Upon completion, this research will yield a comprehensive knowledge framework for culturally responsive educational leadership contextualized for Northern Thailand's diverse ethnic communities. The study will generate: 1) a conceptual model integrating principals' perspectives and motivations; 2) an empirically-grounded taxonomy of leadership practices across five dimensions; 3) strategic recommendations for addressing systemic challenges; and 4) a transformative paradigm shifting from deficit-based to asset-based perspectives on cultural

diversity. This framework will provide actionable guidance for principals, inform policy reforms, and contribute to international scholarship on educational leadership in multicultural settings.

Methodology

Research design

This research employed a qualitative descriptive-interpretive approach (Lichtman, 2023) with multiple case sites to examine culturally responsive leadership in Northern Thailand. The design was selected for its effectiveness in investigating complex leadership phenomena within authentic contexts. The study explored three dimensions: how principals conceptualize cultural diversity based on their experiences; how they implement responsive practices while navigating challenges; and what recommendations they offer for educational leadership transformation in Thailand. Data collection methods were triangulated to develop a comprehensive understanding of culturally responsive leadership across Northern Thailand's diverse educational settings.

Research participants

The key informants were 20 school principals purposively selected based on having at least 5 years of experience managing culturally diverse schools and who demonstrated recognized achievements. The participants represented diverse demographic characteristics: 60% male and 40% female; ages ranging from 45-60 years; 75% with master's degrees and 25% with doctoral degrees; 80% specialized in educational administration; and experience as principals ranging from 5-20 years (average of 12.5 years).

Their schools varied in size (55% small schools with fewer than 119 students, 35% medium-sized schools with 120-719 students, and 10% large schools with 720-1,679 students), level (60% primary, 25% extended opportunity schools, and 15% secondary), and were distributed across seven northern provinces, including Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, Nan, Lamphun, Lampang, and Phayao.

The schools operated in diverse cultural contexts with students from multiple ethnic backgrounds, including Thai lowlanders, Karen, Hmong, Akha, Lahu, Tai Yai, and Tai Lue communities. Languages used in these school communities included Central Thai, Northern Thai dialect, and various ethnic languages. Religious diversity was also present, with Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and traditional beliefs represented.

Data collection

Data were collected over six months (January-June 2024) through three complementary methods. In-depth interviews used a semi-structured protocol of 18 open-ended questions across four domains: perspectives on cultural diversity, leadership practices, implementation challenges, and systemic recommendations. Each principal participated in a 45-60 minute primary interview, with follow-up interviews (20-30 minutes) conducted with 12 participants to explore emerging themes. Interviews were conducted in Central Thai (65%) or Northern Thai dialect (35%), audio-recorded with permission, and supplemented with field notes capturing non-verbal cues and contextual information.

Non-participant observation involved 2-3 visits per school (4-6 hours each) using structured protocols to document physical environments reflecting cultural diversity, communication patterns, leadership behaviors during meetings, use of local languages, and community engagement activities. Observations were recorded through standardized forms with both descriptive and reflective sections, with photographs taken to supplement written notes. To enhance reliability, two researchers conducted simultaneous observations at 40% of sites, comparing notes to reach consensus on interpretations.

Document analysis examined 174 formal and informal documents (8-9 per school), including development plans, curriculum materials, policies, meeting minutes, newsletters, and community communications. Each document was analyzed using a systematic protocol focusing on evidence of cultural responsiveness in vision statements, policies, curriculum, community relations, and assessment practices. All data were organized in a secure database with a triangulation matrix mapping research questions to specific data sources, ensuring each aspect of culturally responsive leadership was examined through multiple methods (Buosonte, 2013). The research team met bi-weekly to review progress, discuss emerging findings, and make methodological adjustments as needed.

Data analysis

Content analysis followed a systematic process beginning with verbatim transcription of interviews. Transcripts in Northern Thai dialect were translated into Central Thai by bilingual research team members, with back-translation performed on a 20% sample to verify accuracy. Open coding generated approximately 150 initial codes without predetermined categories, focusing on identifying meaningful segments related to culturally responsive leadership. This process was conducted manually by three researchers working independently, with weekly meetings to discuss emerging codes and resolve discrepancies.

Axial coding followed, examining relationships between the open codes and grouping them into larger categories. This process was guided by emerging patterns in the data and theoretical frameworks of culturally responsive leadership (Johnson, 2014; Khalifa et al., 2016) and transformative leadership (Shields, 2010). Through constant comparative analysis, these were refined into 28 subcategories and consolidated into major themes. Observational data were analyzed through a parallel process, with field notes systematically coded using the emerging framework. Document analysis followed a similar approach, with particular attention to alignment between stated policies and actual practices as observed and reported in interviews.

Integration of data from the three collection methods occurred through matrix analysis, organizing findings according to research questions and themes across data sources. This enabled systematic triangulation, identifying points of convergence and divergence across interviews, observations, and documents (Buosonte, 2013; Creswell, 2008). Frequency analysis identified patterns across participants, with attention to both prevalent and outlier perspectives. Throughout the four-month analysis period (July-October 2024), analytical memos documented the team's evolving interpretations and methodological decisions, serving as an audit trail. Regular team meetings resolved coding discrepancies through consensus, ensuring findings remained grounded in participants' experiences while maintaining theoretical coherence. The final synthesis incorporated both manifest contents directly expressed by participants and latent content reflecting underlying patterns, providing a comprehensive understanding of culturally responsive leadership in Northern Thailand.

Trustworthiness

Multiple strategies ensured the trustworthiness of findings. Data triangulation compared information from different sources (interviews, observations, documents) and participants. Methodological triangulation cross-checked findings obtained through different methods, while investigator triangulation involved multiple researchers independently analyzing data (Creswell, 2008). Member checking allowed participants to verify transcript accuracy and preliminary interpretations, resulting in valuable clarifications. In addition, the seven experts who evaluated recommendations represented diverse perspectives in educational administration, policy, and multicultural education.

Ethical considerations

This research received approval from Chiang Mai University's Human Research Ethics Committee (Certificate No. 132/67, Project Code CMUREC No. 67/207) and from provincial educational authorities. All participants provided informed consent after receiving information about the study. Data were anonymized through coding systems to protect identities. Participants reviewed their interview transcripts before analysis, and the research team followed protocols for culturally respectful engagement throughout the study, particularly important in this diverse cultural context.

Findings

The study revealed important insights about culturally responsive leadership in Northern Thailand's multicultural context across three key dimensions: 1) principals' perspectives and experiences, 2) leadership practices, and 3) recommendations for educational leadership transformation.

1) Perspectives, concepts, and life experiences of school principals

The study identified three foundational elements that characterize successful culturally responsive leaders. The participants in this study represented diverse demographic characteristics as shown in Table 1, including variations in gender, age, education level, field of study, and years of experience as principals.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of school principal participants

Characteristic	Distribution	Percentage
Gender	Male: 12	60%
	Female: 8	40%
Age	45-49 years: 5	25%
	50-55 years: 9	45%
	56-60 years: 6	30%
Education	Master's degree: 15	75%
	Doctoral degree: 5	25%
Field of study	Educational Administration: 16	80%
	Curriculum & Instruction: 2	10%
	Educational Assessment: 1	5%
	Other: 1	5%
Experience as principal	5-10 years: 7	35%
	11-15 years: 8	40%
	16-20 years: 5	25%

The schools where these principals worked encompassed a range of contexts as detailed in Table 2, varying significantly in size, educational level, geographic location across seven northern provinces, and the ethnic composition of their student populations. This diversity of school settings provided rich insights into culturally responsive leadership practices across different environments.

Table 2. School contexts in the study

Characteristic	Distribution	Percentage
School size	Small (<119 students): 11	55%
	Medium (120-719 students): 7	35%
	Large (720-1,679 students): 2	10%
Level	Primary: 12	60%
	Extended opportunity: 5	25%
	Secondary: 3	15%
Province	Chiang Mai: 5	25%
	Chiang Rai: 4	20%
	Mae Hong Son: 3	15%
	Nan: 3	15%
	Lamphun: 2	10%
	Lampang: 2	10%
	Phayao: 1	5%
Ethnic groups present	Thai lowlanders: 20	100%
	Karen: 12	60%
	Hmong: 10	50%
	Akha: 8	40%
	Lahu: 6	30%
	Tai Yai: 5	25%
	Tai Lue: 4	20%
	Others: 3	15%

The demographic characteristics of principals (Table 1) and the diverse school contexts in which they worked (Table 2) provided the foundation for understanding how these leaders developed their approaches to cultural diversity. Analysis of interview data revealed three foundational elements that characterized these successful culturally responsive leaders: their conceptualization of cultural diversity as social capital rather than as a problem; the formative role of their direct personal experiences with diversity; and their strong motivation for creating educational equity. These elements transcended differences in principals' backgrounds and school contexts, suggesting core attributes of effective culturally responsive leadership.

1.1) *Cultural diversity as social capital rather than problem*

A fundamental finding was that 90% of participants viewed cultural diversity as valuable social capital rather than as a challenge to be overcome. This asset-based perspective represents a significant departure from deficit-oriented views of cultural difference. Principals emphasized the richness that diverse cultural knowledge, languages, and practices brought to their schools and saw these elements as foundations for meaningful education. As one principal explained: *"Cultural diversity is not a problem to be solved but a resource to be utilized. When we recognize the unique strengths and perspectives that different cultural backgrounds bring, we can create a richer learning environment for all students."* (Principal 3)

1.2) *Formation through direct personal experience*

The study found that 70% of successful principals had personal experiences with cultural diversity, either through their own backgrounds or through extensive work in diverse communities. These experiences had sensitized them to the challenges and opportunities associated with cultural diversity and had shaped their leadership approaches. Their leadership was grounded in lived experience rather than merely theoretical understanding. One principal reflected: *"Growing up in a community with Thai lowlanders, various hill tribes, and Chinese*

people, I absorbed the experience of living together amidst differences from childhood. When working, I understand and know how to communicate with people from different cultures." (Principal 8)

1.3) *Motivation for educational equity*

Principals were strongly motivated by the goal of creating educational equity, with 95% expressing a commitment to ensuring that all students, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, receive quality education. This commitment was often sparked by witnessing educational inequities firsthand and translated into concrete efforts to create inclusive educational environments, adapt teaching methods to diverse learning needs, and build partnerships with communities. As one principal stated: *"When I saw students with potential being overlooked because of cultural differences, it made me feel that something had to be done. We had to change this unfair system."* (Principal 16)

In summary, the perspectives, concepts, and life experiences of school principals revealed a pattern of leadership development grounded in both personal experience and professional commitment. Their asset-based view of cultural diversity, developed through direct engagement with diverse communities, and driven by a passion for educational equity, formed the foundation for their culturally responsive leadership practices. Rather than viewing diversity as a challenge to overcome, these principals recognized it as a rich resource that could enhance educational experiences for all students. This perspective was particularly significant given the complex multicultural contexts of Northern Thailand in which they worked, as detailed in the school demographics.

2) Actual practices reflecting culturally responsive leadership

The research identified five key dimensions of practices that embody culturally responsive educational leadership. Table 3 summarizes these practices and their implementation rates across the 20 schools studied, highlighting both widespread practices and areas with potential for further development. The practices within each dimension are arranged by implementation rate, revealing patterns of adoption across Northern Thailand schools. This comprehensive summary enables readers to identify which culturally responsive practices were most widely implemented and where opportunities for growth remain.

Table 3. Summary of key culturally responsive leadership practices and implementation rates

Leadership dimension	Key practices	Implementation rate (%)
Creating conducive environments	Anti-discrimination policies	100
	Cultural corners showcasing community identities	90
	Intercultural understanding activities	85
	Multilingual signage	80
	Spaces for various religious practices	75
Developing responsive curriculum	Local curricula reflecting community knowledge	95
	Incorporation of local wisdom	90
	Diverse teaching methods	85
	Bilingual teaching approaches	80
	Flexible assessment methods	70
Building community collaboration	Parent networks representing cultural groups	100
	Community experts as resource persons	95
	Inclusive school committees	90

Table 3. (Cont.)

Leadership dimension	Key practices	Implementation rate (%)
	Community sites as learning resources	85
	Collaborative community projects	80
Developing teachers' competencies	Training on multicultural education	90
	Training on teaching diverse learners	85
	Learning exchanges between teachers	80
	Study visits to successful schools	75
	Culturally appropriate materials development	70
Assessment and development	Stakeholder involvement in evaluation	85
	Culturally responsive indicators	80
	Cultural responsiveness in development plans	80
	Context-appropriate assessment criteria	75
	Continuous improvement culture	70

As illustrated in Table 3, the culturally responsive leadership practices implemented by principals varied in adoption rates across the five key dimensions. While certain practices like anti-discrimination policies (100%) and parent networks (100%) were universally implemented, others such as flexible assessment methods (70%) and continuous improvement culture (70%) showed more limited adoption. These implementation patterns reflect both priorities and challenges in developing culturally responsive education. The following sections explore how principals enacted these practices in each dimension, revealing the nuanced approaches they developed to address their specific school contexts.

2.1) *Creating environments conducive to diversity*

Principals actively created physical and social environments that respected and celebrated diversity through various strategies. Physical spaces reflecting diversity were evident in 90% of schools having cultural corners showcasing community identities, 80% using multilingual signage, and 75% providing spaces for various religious practices. All schools (100%) had clear policies against discrimination and bullying based on cultural differences, while 85% regularly organized events facilitating intercultural understanding. As one principal explained: *"We've transformed our school environment to reflect the cultural diversity of our students. From multilingual signs to artwork representing different cultures, we want every student to see themselves represented in our school."* (Principal 4)

2.2) *Developing culturally responsive curriculum and instruction*

Principals led comprehensive efforts to develop curriculum and teaching approaches that integrated cultural perspectives and responded to diverse learning needs. These efforts included developing local curricula reflecting community cultural knowledge (95% of schools), implementing bilingual teaching approaches (80%), incorporating local wisdom into teaching across subject areas (90%), using diverse teaching methods accommodating different learning styles (85%), and implementing flexible assessment methods (70%). One principal described their approach: *"We've developed a local curriculum that incorporates the history, knowledge, and cultural practices of our community. Students learn academic content through familiar cultural contexts, which enhances their engagement and understanding."* (Principal 9)

2.3) *Building community collaboration*

Effective principals built strong partnerships with families and communities through systematic strategies. All schools (100%) had parent networks representing different cultural groups, 90% ensured that school committees included representatives from all cultural

groups, 80% developed collaborative projects with communities, 95% invited community experts to share knowledge in educational settings, and 85% utilized community sites as learning resources. This collaborative approach recognized communities as partners rather than merely service recipients. One principal explained: *"Our school belongs to the community. We regularly invite parents and community leaders to participate in school planning and evaluation. We also bring community experts into the classroom to share their knowledge and skills with our students."* (Principal 17)

2.4) Developing teachers' cultural competencies

Principals invested significantly in developing teachers' capacities to work effectively in multicultural contexts. This included providing training on multicultural education principles (90%), organizing study visits to successful multicultural schools (75%), facilitating learning exchanges between teachers from different backgrounds (80%), training on teaching techniques for diverse learners (85%), and supporting the development of culturally appropriate learning materials (70%). As one principal described: *"Teachers are the key to culturally responsive education. We provide regular professional development opportunities focused on cultural awareness, bias recognition, and inclusive teaching strategies. We've also created teacher learning communities where teachers can share experiences and practices."* (Principal 15)

2.5) Implementing continuous assessment and development

Principals established comprehensive systems for monitoring, evaluation, and continuous improvement. These included developing indicators capturing various dimensions of culturally responsive education (80%), adapting assessment criteria to fit local contexts (75%), involving stakeholders from various cultural backgrounds in evaluation processes (85%), incorporating cultural responsiveness into long-term school development plans (80%), and establishing organizational cultures that valued continuous improvement (70%). One principal emphasized: *"We regularly assess our practices to ensure they're effectively serving all our students. We look at academic outcomes across different cultural groups, gather feedback from students and families, and use this information to refine our approaches."* (Principal 18)

Collectively, these five dimensions of practice demonstrate how culturally responsive leadership was enacted in Northern Thailand's schools. The practices ranged from creating inclusive physical and social environments to developing responsive curricula, building strong community partnerships, enhancing teacher capacities, and implementing systematic assessment approaches. Implementation rates varied across practices, indicating both areas of strength and opportunities for further development. Notable was the consistently high implementation of community collaboration strategies, suggesting that principals recognized strong community partnerships as foundational to culturally responsive education. These findings reveal that culturally responsive leadership in this context was multidimensional, requiring principals to simultaneously address physical environments, curriculum, community relationships, staff development, and organizational systems.

3) Success factors and challenges

In response to research objective 2, which aimed to analyze actual leadership practices, our findings not only identified specific culturally responsive practices but also examined the underlying factors that enabled or hindered their successful implementation. Through systematic analysis of principals' experiences, a clear pattern emerged of success factors, challenges, and strategic responses that shaped their ability to implement culturally responsive practices effectively. Table 4 presents these elements and their prevalence across the study

participants, providing deeper insight into the contextual conditions that influence culturally responsive leadership in Northern Thailand's schools.

Table 4. Success factors, challenges, and strategies

Category	Elements	Percentage
Success factors	*Leadership factors:*	
	- Clear vision	90%
	- Commitment to development	85%
	- Management skills	80%
	Participation factors:	
	- Community cooperation	95%
	- Networking	80%
	- Agency support	75%
	Support system factors:	
	- Clear policies	85%
	- Sufficient resources	70%
	- Information systems	65%
Challenges	*Resource limitations:*	
	- Budget constraints	90%
	- Personnel shortages	85%
	- Insufficient materials	80%
	Management challenges:	
	- Contextual complexity	75%
	- Coordination difficulties	70%
	- Monitoring challenges	65%
	Attitudinal barriers:	
	- Cultural biases	80%
	- Resistance to change	75%
	- Misunderstandings	70%
Strategies for addressing challenges	*Resource mobilization:*	
	- Building collaborative networks	90%
	- Community fundraising	80%
	- Seeking external support	75%
	System development:	
	- Restructuring administration	85%
	- Developing information systems	75%
	- Creating coordination mechanisms	80%
	Attitude adjustment:	
	- Creating understanding through activities	95%
	- Continuous personnel development	90%
	- Building positive organizational culture	85%

As shown in Table 4, success factors spanned leadership qualities (vision, commitment), participation elements (community cooperation, networking), and support systems (policies, resources). Principals faced significant challenges primarily in resources (budget constraints, personnel shortages), management complexities, and attitudinal barriers. In response, they developed strategic approaches to resource mobilization, system development, and attitude adjustment, with the most widely adopted strategies being those focused on creating understanding through activities (95%) and developing personnel (90%). This pattern of challenges and responses reveals how principals navigated constraints to implement the practices detailed in the following sections.

3.1) *Success factors*

Three key factors contributed to successful implementation of culturally responsive leadership. Leadership factors included having a clear vision (90%), commitment to development (85%), and strong management skills (80%). Participation factors were vital, with community cooperation (95%) being the most critical, followed by networking (80%) and agency support (75%). Support system factors included clear policies (85%), sufficient resources (70%), and information systems (65%). These interconnected factors created an enabling environment for culturally responsive education to flourish.

3.2) *Challenges*

Principals identified three primary categories of challenges. Resource limitations were the most significant, including budget constraints (90%), personnel shortages (85%), and insufficient materials (80%). Management challenges included contextual complexity (75%), coordination difficulties (70%), and monitoring challenges (65%). Attitudinal barriers persisted in many contexts, including cultural biases (80%), resistance to change (75%), and misunderstandings (70%). These challenges required multifaceted responses and continuous attention.

3.3) *Strategies for addressing challenges*

Successful principals employed various strategies to address these challenges. Resource mobilization strategies included building collaborative networks (90%), community fundraising (80%), and seeking external support (75%). System development involved restructuring administration (85%), developing information systems (75%), and creating coordination mechanisms (80%). The most prevalent strategies focused on attitude adjustment through creating understanding via activities (95%), continuous personnel development (90%), and building positive organizational culture (85%). These strategic approaches demonstrate principals' creativity and persistence in overcoming obstacles.

The analysis of success factors, challenges, and strategies reveals the complex ecosystem required for culturally responsive leadership to flourish. While clear vision and community cooperation were critical success factors, resource limitations and attitudinal barriers presented significant obstacles. What distinguished successful principals was their ability to develop creative solutions through building networks, restructuring systems, and fostering positive attitudes. Their approaches demonstrate that effective culturally responsive leadership requires not only implementing specific practices but also developing strategic responses to systemic challenges. This finding has important implications for leadership development, suggesting that building problem-solving capacities and strategic thinking is as important as developing specific cultural competencies.

4) Recommendations for educational leadership paradigm transformation

Based on the findings of this research, a comprehensive framework for transforming educational leadership paradigms in Thailand was developed. This framework, presented in Table 5, encompasses five interconnected areas necessary for systemic change in educational leadership. Each area includes key components, specific approaches, and implementation considerations derived from the research findings. These recommendations were evaluated by seven experts in educational administration, policy, and multicultural education, receiving high ratings for both appropriateness (average 4.66 out of 5) and feasibility (average 4.39 out of 5).

Table 5. Comprehensive framework for educational leadership paradigm transformation

Recommendation area	Key components	Specific approaches	Implementation considerations
Developing leaders' mindsets that value diversity	• Perspective shift towards diversity as capital • Critical self-awareness • Cross-cultural competence	• Reflective practice protocols • Asset-based perspective training • Experiential learning with diverse communities	• Requires sustained engagement rather than one-time training • Should address implicit biases and assumptions • Expert rating: 4.85/5.0 for appropriateness
Developing support systems and mechanisms	• Policy frameworks • Information systems • Collaborative networks	• Clear guidelines for culturally responsive practices • Equity-focused data tracking systems • School networks with similar diversity profiles	• Needs alignment with national education policies • Requires resource allocation • Expert rating: 4.70/5.0 for appropriateness
Developing culturally integrated curriculum	• Flexible curriculum frameworks • Culturally responsive pedagogy • Diverse learning materials	• Guidelines incorporating local knowledge • Teaching approaches leveraging cultural backgrounds • Materials reflecting diverse perspectives	• Must maintain academic standards while integrating cultural content • Requires teacher preparation • Expert rating: 4.65/5.0 for appropriateness
Developing personnel capabilities	• Administrator preparation • Teacher development • Professional learning communities	• Cultural responsiveness as core competency • Practitioner research in Thai contexts • Continuous improvement communities	• Should address both pre-service and in-service preparation • Needs institutional support • Expert rating: 4.60/5.0 for appropriateness
Implementing assessment and continuous development	• Culturally appropriate indicators • Participatory evaluation • Improvement feedback loops	• Multidimensional assessment frameworks • Diverse stakeholder involvement • Data-informed improvement processes	• Should avoid oversimplification of complex outcomes • Requires balance of accountability and improvement • Expert rating: 4.50/5.0 for appropriateness

Note: Overall expert ratings indicated high appropriateness (average 4.66/5.0) and feasibility (average 4.39/5.0) across all recommendation areas.

This comprehensive framework recognizes that transforming educational leadership to respond effectively to cultural diversity requires coordinated change across multiple dimensions. The recommendations address both individual development (mindsets, capabilities) and systemic change (support systems, curriculum, assessment), reflecting the multifaceted nature of educational transformation. While each area can be addressed individually, the framework's strength lies in its integrated approach: developing leaders with appropriate mindsets, supported by enabling systems and equipped with necessary skills and tools. Implementation should be context-sensitive, recognizing the specific cultural diversities

present in different regions of Thailand while maintaining core principles of equity and inclusion.

Discussion

The findings of this research contribute to understanding culturally responsive educational leadership in several important ways, both within Thailand and in relation to international scholarship. First, they highlight how successful principals in Northern Thailand conceptualize cultural diversity as a form of social capital that enriches the educational environment rather than as a problem to be overcome. This perspective aligns with Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth, which recognizes the assets inherent in diverse communities, but applies it specifically to educational leadership in the Thai context. This finding resonates strongly with research by Khalifa (2018) in the United States and Johnson (2014) in Canada, who similarly found that effective culturally responsive leaders reject deficit perspectives in favor of asset-based approaches to diversity. The consistency of this finding across dramatically different cultural contexts suggests the foundational importance of asset-based framing in culturally responsive leadership globally.

Second, the research reveals the importance of direct personal experience with cultural diversity in developing effective leadership. Most of the successful principals either came from diverse backgrounds themselves or had extensive experience working in multicultural communities. This finding parallels Lopez's (2016) research with school leaders in urban American settings and Santamaría et al.'s (2014) work with indigenous educational leaders in New Zealand, both of which emphasized the role of lived experience in developing cultural responsiveness. However, our findings extend this understanding by demonstrating how Thai principals specifically leverage their cultural experiences within a Southeast Asian context characterized by complex ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity that differs significantly from Western multicultural contexts.

Third, the study identifies five key dimensions of culturally responsive leadership practice that are particularly relevant to the Thai context. While these dimensions align broadly with international literature on culturally responsive leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016), they reflect unique adaptations to the specific cultural, social, and educational contexts of Northern Thailand. For example, the emphasis on bilingual education and the integration of local wisdom into curriculum represents a contextualized application of responsive leadership principles. These practices echo similar work by Horsford et al. (2011) in diverse American districts and by Walker and Hallinger (2015) in East Asian contexts, yet demonstrate important adaptations to Thailand's particular cultural landscape. The finding that all schools maintained parent networks representing different cultural groups (100% implementation rate) surpasses implementation rates found in similar studies in Western contexts (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012), suggesting that Thai principals may be particularly effective at community engagement across cultural boundaries.

A significant finding is the tension between centralized educational policies and the need for localized, culturally responsive approaches. This tension is not unique to Thailand but is particularly relevant in a country with both a strong centralized education system and significant cultural diversity. This mirrors what Mok (2006) identified as the centralization-localization dilemma in diverse education systems across East and Southeast Asia. The recommendations for policy reforms address this tension by suggesting ways to create more flexible frameworks that allow for local adaptation while maintaining quality standards, similar to approaches advocated by DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2018) for balancing systemic coherence with cultural responsiveness.

The study also reveals the important role of community engagement in culturally responsive leadership. Successful principals actively involved community members in school

governance, curriculum development, and teaching, recognizing that cultural responsiveness requires genuine partnership with the communities being served. This aligns with research on community-based education and emphasizes the need for leadership approaches that prioritize community voice and agency (Khalifa, 2012; Green, 2017). The particularly high implementation rates for community collaboration strategies (80-100%) suggest that Thai principals may have developed especially effective approaches to community engagement that could inform international practice.

Together, these findings illuminate how culturally responsive leadership manifests in Northern Thailand's unique context while connecting to broader international scholarship. The research demonstrates that effective culturally responsive leadership transcends simplistic technical approaches, instead requiring transformed mindsets that value diversity, systems that support responsiveness, and continuously developing practices. By reconceptualizing cultural diversity as an asset rather than deficit, these Thai school leaders create educational environments that not only respect differences but actively leverage them to enhance learning and promote equity — offering valuable insights for educational leadership globally while addressing Thailand's specific multicultural realities. These findings suggest that culturally responsive leadership development must be holistic, addressing individual mindsets, organizational systems, and community relationships through culturally contextualized approaches that acknowledge both universal principles and local cultural realities.

Limitations of the study

While this study provides valuable insights into culturally responsive leadership in Northern Thailand, several limitations should be acknowledged. The research was conducted exclusively in the northern region, which has specific patterns of cultural diversity that may differ from other regions of the country. Transferability to contexts with different configurations of diversity requires careful consideration. Additionally, the study relied primarily on self-reported data from principals, which may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly given the cultural value placed on harmony in Thai society. Although triangulation through observation and document analysis helped mitigate this limitation, future research would benefit from including more extensive observational data and perspectives from teachers, students, and community members.

The cross-sectional nature of the study captures practices at a specific point in time rather than tracing the development of culturally responsive leadership over time. Longitudinal studies would provide valuable insights into how such leadership evolves and how principals navigate changing demographics and policy contexts. Finally, while the study identifies successful practices, it does not establish causal relationships between specific leadership approaches and student outcomes. Future research combining qualitative insights with quantitative measures of educational equity and achievement would strengthen the evidence base for culturally responsive leadership in diverse Thai contexts. Despite these limitations, the study's rich qualitative data provides a foundation for understanding culturally responsive leadership in Thailand and offers insights that can inform both theory and practice.

Conclusion and implications

This research illuminates culturally responsive educational leadership in Northern Thailand, revealing that successful leaders share three defining characteristics: viewing cultural diversity as valuable social capital, having direct personal experiences with diversity, and being motivated by educational equity. These leaders implement practices across five key dimensions: creating conducive environments, developing responsive curriculum, building community collaboration, enhancing teachers' cultural competencies, and implementing continuous assessment — all adapted to Northern Thailand's context while embodying

universal equity principles. The findings demonstrate that effective culturally responsive leadership transcends technical approaches, instead requiring transformed mindsets that value diversity and recognize community cultural knowledge as legitimate educational resources.

The implications for education systems are multifaceted, encompassing leadership preparation, policy reform, and teacher development. Leadership preparation programs must focus on developing diversity-valuing mindsets through experiential learning, critical reflection, and mentoring relationships with leaders from diverse backgrounds. National policies should establish flexible curriculum frameworks balancing local cultural knowledge with common standards, funding mechanisms addressing diversity-related resource needs, principal certification requiring cultural competency, and teacher deployment policies prioritizing linguistic and cultural compatibility. In addition, teacher preparation programs must integrate cultural responsiveness throughout their curriculum, providing field experiences in diverse communities, linguistic diversity training, curriculum adaptation methods, and critical reflection activities addressing cultural biases, while actively recruiting candidates from underrepresented communities.

This research demonstrates that culturally responsive leadership fundamentally transforms how we conceptualize diversity, education, and leadership itself. By reconceptualizing cultural diversity as capital rather than deficit, schools create environments that leverage differences to enhance learning and promote equity. Future research should explore the longitudinal development of culturally responsive leadership, regional variations, multiple stakeholder perspectives, links between specific practices and quantitative student outcomes, and intervention approaches for leadership development.

This research generates new knowledge by demonstrating that culturally responsive leadership fundamentally depends on principals' asset-based mindsets and lived experiences with diversity — with 70% of successful principals having diverse backgrounds — challenging conventional leadership preparation that prioritizes technical over experiential capabilities. It extends Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth theory to Southeast Asian educational leadership and provides empirical evidence through a taxonomy of five leadership dimensions with implementation rates (65-100%). Most significantly, it produces an expert-validated transformation framework (4.66/5.0 appropriateness, 4.39/5.0 feasibility) offering concrete, implementable solutions for resource constraints and systemic challenges. This fills a critical gap in Thai educational research that has historically neglected leadership in favor of teaching and learning, while contributing actionable knowledge to international scholarship on educational leadership in culturally diverse settings.

Acknowledgements

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