

# Cross-Cultural Leadership Practices in Education

Neema Amani U.

Faculty of Business and Management Kampala International University Uganda

## ABSTRACT

In an increasingly interconnected world, educational leadership must evolve to reflect and respond to diverse cultural contexts. This study examines cross-cultural leadership practices in education, drawing on theoretical frameworks including transformational, transactional, and servant leadership models. It analyzes how national and cultural values—grounded in Hofstede’s cultural dimensions—shape leadership behaviors, expectations, and effectiveness in educational settings across countries such as China, Japan, Portugal, Canada, and Colombia. Through a combination of literature review and international case studies, the paper highlights how policy borrowing, cultural hybridity, and local interpretations affect leadership outcomes. The research underscores the complexity of transferring educational leadership practices across borders and the critical role of cultural competence in navigating this complexity. Ultimately, the study advocates for a more nuanced, culturally grounded approach to educational leadership that respects local traditions while engaging global innovations.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural leadership, educational leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, servant leadership, Hofstede cultural dimensions.

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural contexts in educational leadership display both differences and commonalities internationally. Before the 21st century, research in this field was primarily limited to developed Western countries, with other nations rapidly developing their educational systems largely disregarding it. This has changed, as countries like China, Singapore, and Israel now actively research educational leadership, emphasizing a cross-cultural perspective. While cross-cultural studies are common in management, they are just emerging in educational leadership. Researchers face challenges related to language, attitudes, and ideologies. Recent empirical studies analyze indigenous theories and practices of educational leadership from varying cultures. Recognizing the cultural basis of educational practices, Hofstede's four variables are used as a framework to classify cultures. Research across seven countries—Australia, Hong Kong, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, and the UK—examined perceptions of effective leadership, revealing that cultural patterns in leadership traits and behaviors differ by country. Despite shared values, the distinct perceptions of educational leadership suggest that responses to worldwide educational reforms may differ or contradict local understandings [1, 2].

### Theoretical Frameworks for Leadership

Be it in the global North or South, the liberal economies of the world have been grappling with the challenging and evolving landscape of globalisation and its impact on their education systems. Countries have been pursuing policies for the devolution of powers to regions and school systems. They have to deal with the conflicting routes towards decentralisation, privatisation and marketization. With an aim of striving to improve the performance of their educational systems in a competitive global economy, they have been ‘borrowing’ and ‘learning’ from the “best” practices within and across various borders. Generally speaking, learning and borrowing are firmly imprinted in human history and nature and can be found in various forms such as behaviour imitation, direct instruction, knowledge propagation, cultural diffusion, cultural adoption and hybridisation. But, in education, borrowing or learning is often equated with ‘policy borrowing/learning’ as defined by its externally visible modules, instruments or assets. In contrast, schooling, pedagogy and student learning are seen more as implicit processes involving embedding and internalising knowledge. Educational reform policies are often referred to uncritically as if

they are indisputable positive knowledge. Rarely do scholars examine how or why those policies come to be. Perspectives from policy sociology, outside the mainstream education research tradition, have profound implications when applied to policy analyses. It is through intercultural lens that many unanswered questions are about to be properly questioned. For instance: Why did schools in China borrow the New Zealand's school development model? What eager hopes did those who participated in policy transfer have? Why did they encounter such an unbearable difficulty in transplantation? The commonly adopted keyword 'cross-national diffusion' is more 'political' and less 'cultural' than the concept 'policy transfer', both of which are quite 'Westernised' thus fall short of domestic understandings. Like borrowing abroad, indigenous learning is also a process that warrants thorough discussion and analysis [3, 4].

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership research began in the late 1970s with Bass's interest in charismatic leader behaviors and political leadership. It proliferated after the introduction of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). A multi-factor developmental approach focusing entirely on transformational leadership behavior emerged. Transformational leadership can be viewed as the highest order of a comprehensive hierarchy of leader behavior including transactional social exchange leadership and leader-member exchange. All can be demonstrated to have distinct and universally validated measurement scales. All have been found to predict motivation, satisfaction with leadership, and commitment. A comprehensive and consistent pan-cultural model of leadership has emerged. However, conducting widely based studies under disparate conditions to develop cross-cultural leadership measures is not valued equally in all cultures. Key aspects of this enterprise and accompanying pragmatic applications of Holistic frameworks will be presented. The servicing of intangibles (knowledge, information, reputation, relationships) is of special interest in institutional settings. Copyright law considerations restrict the provision of such services but to the providers can produce lasting relationships, special information, and intangibles which can be resold. Relationship fairness is treated as a key concept in assessing the wisdom of the terms of business in handling questions of leadership and preventing organizational malfunction or decline. Concern is raised about bypassing immediate threat options for such intangibles as reputational damage and footlosses [5, 6].

### **Transactional Leadership**

Transactional Leadership focuses on results and functions on the exchange of rewards and punishments from leader to follower in order to motivate a team. More than mere managing, transactional leadership involves building manager/employee exchanges/pacts, or into a transactive relationship where both parties are engaged in a contract of some sort. This exchange is typically one-sided, and generally, the company holds most of the bargaining chips. Transactional leadership is often thought to work best with the self-motivated people in structured and direct environments. Transactional leaders operate on the premises of expectancy theory. Specifically, these leaders set short-term goals (expectations) and motivate their employees to meet them through promised payoffs for good/bad performance. These leaders are often very structured, consistent, and fair. They may also thrive on control, rules, and the status quo. These leaders seek to make an already existing process more efficient instead of looking for change and innovation. Transactional leadership theory falls under the leadership style that operates on a reward/punishment basis. Followers cooperate with the leader to the task in the anticipation of reward (provided by the leader). On the contrary, if a follower does not do what would be expected of them, the leader would have to dispense punishment. Pros of Transactional Leadership: It rewards those who are motivated by self-interest to follow instructions; it provides an unambiguous structure for large organizations; it achieves short-term goals quickly; and rewards and penalties are clearly defined for workers. Cons of Transactional Leadership: The rewards the worker on a practical level only; creativity is limited since the goals and objectives are already set; it does not reward personal initiative [7, 8].

### **Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership, although a newer concept in leadership theories, dates back to 550 B.C. with references in the Bible. Its principles were seen in the Doctrines of the Servant of the Lord and early Puritan texts, as well as in the social justice movements led by Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. The term was coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in the 1970s, influenced by earlier thinkers like Hermann Hesse and Lao Tse. Greenleaf's model centers on altruism and promotes the development of followers without self-serving goals. This approach suggests that followers become healthier, wiser, and more autonomous, which encourages them to become servant leaders themselves, enhancing community betterment. Often, the least privileged display the most influence, with a servant leader emerging to

support all. Servant-leaders focus on uplifting the least privileged in their spheres of impact, contrasting with traditional top-down leadership styles. This paper develops a comprehensive literature review on servant leadership's application in education, defining its components and reviewing existing research on its effect on school principals, student affairs administrators, and teachers. Ultimately, servant leadership prioritizes the needs of followers, positioning servant leaders as stewards who advocate for and empower them, often at personal cost. Follower development is emphasized as crucial in this approach [9, 10].

### **Cultural Dimensions in Leadership**

A variety of theoretical models addressing cultural adaptation and dimensions enlighten discussions on cross-cultural leadership, particularly in educational contexts. Culture encompasses the entire way of life for groups, shaped by deeply embedded and often overlooked dimensions, which highlight cultural differences. Cultural diversity arises from international experiences and is a complex social mechanism that gives meaning to actions. Definitions of culture vary widely, affecting perceptions of cross-cultural challenges. With globalization, the focus on cross-cultural dynamics has intensified, leading to misunderstandings and cultural angst. Hofstede's influential study categorizes cultures into four primary dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and individualism, later adding a fifth: long-term versus short-term orientation. Hofstede emphasized that managers should consider these dimensions in their management styles, suggesting an intuitive continuum within each dimension that can guide interactions and strategies in various cultural contexts [11, 12].

### **Leadership Styles Across Cultures**

Culture, defined in terms of a group's values, rules, lifeways, and institutions, is believed to play a major role in influencing transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership behaviors. Nevertheless, national cultural values were found to influence interpretations of and evaluations of these leadership practices rather than their occurrence. Cross-cultural research on relationship-oriented leadership behaviors has been limited. Non-Western leadership practices, particularly in education, have not been explored. Educational leaders are expected to be interpersonal, understanding, and considerate. Some educational leaders act like friends rather than superiors. At the other extreme, many Asian educational leaders adopt an authoritative style, using coercive power as a means of compliance for their followers. In this study, national culture as a context of educational leadership is viewed as something that encapsulates historical, societal, and cultural experiences of a nation that often perseveres generationally. Given that both educational leadership behaviors and people's responses to those behaviors may be culturally influenced, national culture's role in interpreting educational leadership practices should be investigated. Hofstede's 6-D model of national culture was adopted in this research to address the following questions: • What do educational leaders' Portuguese, English, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cross-cultural leadership practices look like? • How do cultural values and practices, given a particular context and pretext, influence Portuguese, English, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean educational leaders' cross-cultural leadership practices? • What more should be done to inform cross-cultural leadership practices of educational leaders from these cultural contexts? The findings would enrich understanding on cross-cultural leadership practices in education. It is hoped that knowledge of the cultural nuances on practices of educational leaders in this regard would facilitate better interactions and engagements of educational leaders across cultures and also hopes for enhancement and improvement of such practices by advocating and/or introducing desirable styles to educational leaders lacking in such practices [13, 14].

### **Impact of Culture on Educational Leadership**

In examining leaders, it is not uncommon in a given culture or nation to hear a lot of good things about them from the majority of the followers or from the media. Even "bad" leaders may be depicted using positive language, whereas "good" leaders may be described more negatively. Leadership characteristics also seem to go hand in hand with prevailing cultural values. A study found, for example, that egalitarian leaders were perceived as more effective leaders in egalitarian cultures, whereas authoritarian leaders were perceived as more effective leaders in hierarchical cultures. Traits related to collectivism appeared to be more desirable in "collectivist" cultures than in more "individualist" cultures. The Hofstede framework offers an ideal framework for examining how cultural values affect educational leadership, but acknowledged limitations impose a need for caution. Some of the limitations reside in the theories or constructs, such as the characteristics of cultures under each dimension. Others are related to languages and peoples. On top of the concerns with the validity, reliability, or generalizability of instruments that have been translated from one language to another, a scale sometimes used in self-constructed or knowledge-based dimensions needs to be studied further. In addition to ensuring the soundness of the constructs or dimensions, evidence should also be gathered to show that the same scale measures the

same dimensions properly in different cultural contexts. As for the tool itself, explorations of the difference between using the original tool or using a translated version of the tool will benefit educators and researchers across cultures. Researchers acknowledged the subjectivity and the need for further research. In terms of the assessing tool, it cannot be assumed that the traits perceived to be desirable leaders in a given culture are equally perceived in another culture. The item that exploratory factor analysis or any other data reduction method yields and the factors or dimensions the items load on may differ across cultures, caution must also be taken when making cross-cultural comparisons. For in-depth understanding, qualitative approaches such as interviews and observations of leaders in action across cultures will provide fertile ground for further research [15, 16].

### **Case Studies of Cross-Cultural Leadership**

Three case studies from Australia, Colombia, and Canada are summarized. In Colombia, a study was conducted at a primary school in a low socioeconomic area of Bogota, which has three districts: one high income and two low incomes, where the school is located. The challenges include parents working multiple jobs and limited housing. The student body primarily consists of Hispanic families, including many displaced populations. Although resources are limited, the principal reports progress in implementing inclusive education, which traditionally focuses on special education for learning disabilities. The principal's insights revealed a broader understanding of inclusion. The co-learning experience emerged as particularly valuable, with teachers inexperienced in inclusion discussing their challenges while redefining the concept. In Canada, research was held at a K-9 public school in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, in a working-class neighborhood. Here, student income is unexpectedly high, with most students of European, Canadian, or Indigenous descent. Despite a lack of bilingualism, many students are learning English, and additional support staff is available for those with high needs. Many teachers are early in their careers and express frustration over behavioral issues that impede learning. The principal, while newer to leadership, has classroom experience. Community involvement in school activities is notably high [17, 18].

### **Strategies For Effective Cross-Cultural Leadership**

Cross-cultural leadership is complex, presenting both challenges and opportunities. Effective leaders must master a culture's behaviors, symbols, management styles, customs, and the nuances that inform them. They need to mediate internal and external dynamics, bridging differences while managing the scope of these interactions. The essence of successful cross-cultural leadership lies not in isolated cultural elements, but in their interplay. Cross-cultural education is an ongoing action rather than a static set of knowledge; it transcends single course offerings and requires a continuous engagement with diverse realms. To navigate a changing world, education should abandon rigid, standardized models in favor of adapting to live dynamics, harnessing tension for innovation. This complexity includes both constructive and destructive cross-cultural dynamics that can either promote cohesion or lead to separation. Effective cross-cultural leadership, therefore, is a global competence, emphasizing thoughtful engagement with discontinuity and conflict. It doesn't reject discipline, order, or tradition; rather, it requires a foundational structure of trust, clarity of roles, etiquette, and balance before initiating meaningful change. This form of leadership must be intrinsic to the leader's mindset for it to be effective. Cultural missteps often arise from inadequate understanding of deeper cultural undercurrents, morals, and expectations rather than superficial knowledge of customs and history [19, 20].

### **Role of Technology in Cross-Cultural Leadership**

Emerging internet-based technologies are rapidly integrated into education, enhancing early learning and access. These tools include communication platforms, blogs, wikis, podcasts, and social media, fostering collaboration and communication skills vital for cross-cultural leadership. Additionally, educational technologies like interactive whiteboards and tablets are being adopted across K-12 and higher education in South Korea, enhancing ICT infrastructure. Leaders promote these technologies to boost self-directed learning and understanding, while social networking services aim to create a more open learning environment. In China, initiatives address educational equity by providing computers and internet connectivity in rural schools, enabling disadvantaged students to access resources that transform their lives. Such projects aim to reform education systems through technology infusion. However, the challenges of technology adoption in educational contexts, especially for at-risk students, warrant investigation. Technology offers diverse options for achieving success, and the emergence of MOOCs promotes educational equity, allowing broader access regardless of social class or location. Educational leaders must leverage these technologies to bridge the divides in education and enhance learning

opportunities. Understanding digital platforms is crucial for educators to facilitate community interaction and effectively apply pedagogical methods in diverse contexts [21, 22].

### **Future Trends in Cross-Cultural Leadership**

Cross-cultural leadership has been one of the growing global trends in the educational system and similar industries for the foreseeable future. The majority of large educational systems are country-wide systems, with leadership provided largely by state or national governments. Nonetheless, with the emergence of the idea that local contexts should be taken into account in improving schools, there has been considerable variability in the approaches states and governments have taken on education. Some systems emphasize educational quality at the school level by decentralization or deregulation. In contrast, others, especially developing systems, favour a centralist approach by technical innovations and higher regional government influence on the local schools. With globalization in the economy and society, cross-national similarities in educational achievement are developing. Accordingly, there are similar bases of cross-national educational reforms in many countries, such as the emphasis on accountability and standards and the high-stakes testing in many high-achieving educational systems. However, the latter at the same time also brings about the threat of educational inequity and quality concerns. This is why a cross-cultural perspective on educational leadership is becoming critical, engaging in issues such as why cross-national educational reforms have had contentious results and how to adapt the foreign reforms to enhance their success in the receiving educational systems. Local contexts of the educational leadership in terms of educational policy tradition, system design and governance structure, school management configuration, and teacher professionalism and status play indispensable roles in determining the process and result of the adaptation. Cultural issues in the adaptation of the foreign educational leadership styles/reforms are also critically and increasingly deserving consideration in educational leadership research. While social sciences often regarded culture as a contagion that continuously maintains the core ideas in time and space, little research approached culture as a mediator that is actively involved in actively, constructively, and creatively interpreting the outside stimuli based on the understanding of local situations. To meet this end, it is reasonable to study educational leadership in the light of the Hofstede four-factor paradigm. Other culturally-oriented studies have either concentrated on one or a couple of cultural aspects or failed to study the cultural issues in a systematic and integrative manner [23, 24, 25].

### **CONCLUSION**

Cross-cultural leadership in education is not a one-size-fits-all model but a dynamic process influenced by deeply ingrained cultural values, historical experiences, and socio-political conditions. As education systems worldwide strive for excellence and innovation, understanding the cultural foundations of leadership becomes indispensable. This study reveals that while transformational, transactional, and servant leadership models provide useful frameworks, their implementation and reception are significantly mediated by cultural context. Effective cross-cultural leaders must possess global competence, intercultural sensitivity, and an adaptive mindset that allows them to integrate local realities with global standards. Policy transfers must be critically assessed, not only for their practicality but also for their cultural relevance and sustainability. To cultivate resilient and inclusive educational environments, future leaders must move beyond superficial cultural awareness toward deep, relational engagement with the communities they serve. Continued comparative research and intercultural dialogue are essential for advancing leadership practices that are both globally informed and locally grounded.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Miao C, Humphrey RH, Qian S. Emotional intelligence and servant leadership: A meta-analytic review. *Business ethics, the environment & responsibility*. 2021 Apr;30(2):231-43. [HTML]
2. Galsanjigmed E, Sekiguchi T. Challenges women experience in leadership careers: an integrative review. *Merits*. 2023 May 19;3(2):366-89.
3. Ricart-Huguet J, Sellars EA. The politics of decentralization level: Local and regional devolution as substitutes. *World Politics*. 2023;75(2):353-89.
4. Pope T, Dalton G, Coggins M. How can devolution deliver regional growth in England. *Institute for Government*. 2023 May:40.
5. Ali Ababneh OM, Awwad AS, Abu-Haija A. The association between green human resources practices and employee engagement with environmental initiatives in hotels: The moderation effect of perceived transformational leadership. *Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism*. 2021 Aug 9;20(3):390-416. [HTML]

6. Karimi S, Ahmadi Malek F, Yaghoubi Farani A, Liobikienė G. The role of transformational leadership in developing innovative work behaviors: The mediating role of employees' psychological capital. *Sustainability*. 2023 Jan 9;15(2):1267. [mdpi.com](https://doi.org/10.3390/su15021267)
7. TEKİN İÇ, Türk UA. A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF TRANSACTIONAL LEADERSHIP BASED ON THE WEB OF SCIENCE (WOS) PLATFORM. *The Journal of Academic Social Science*. 2021;9(116):533-44.
8. Faisal MM, Akhtar M, Haider A, ur Rehman Z. IMPACT OF TRANSACTIONAL LEADERSHIP ON KNOWLEDGE HIDING BEHAVIOR; MODERATING ROLE OF ISLAMIC WORK ETHICS. *International Journal of Management Research and Emerging Sciences*. 2021 Dec 1;11(4). [ijmres.pk](https://doi.org/10.21861/ijmres.110401)
9. Noland A, Richards K. Servant teaching: An exploration of teacher servant leadership on student outcomes. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. 2015 Dec 8;15(6):16-38.
10. Shafai AA. Servant-leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia. *Global Servant-Leadership: Wisdom, Love, and Legitimate Power in the Age of Chaos*. 2020 Nov 12;253.
11. Tavanti M. Cross-cultural Vincentian leadership: The challenge of developing culturally intelligent leaders. *Vincentian Heritage Journal*. 2005 Oct 1;26(1):201-5.
12. Zepp R, Eckstein D, Khalid M, Li CS. Teachers' perceptions of good and bad leaders in seven cultures. *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*. 2009;7(1):30.
13. Fisher D. Educational leadership and the impact of societal culture on effective practices. *Journal of Research in International Education*. 2021 Aug;20(2):134-53.
14. Shengnan L, Hallinger P. Unpacking the effects of culture on school leadership and teacher learning in China. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*. 2021 Mar;49(2):214-33. [\[HTML\]](#)
15. Rath CR, Grosskopf S, Barmeyer C. Leadership in the VUCA world-a systematic literature review and its link to intercultural competencies. *European Journal of Cross-Cultural Competence and Management*. 2021;5(3):195-219. [\[HTML\]](#)
16. Torres LL. School organizational culture and leadership: Theoretical trends and new analytical proposals. *Education sciences*. 2022 Apr 2;12(4):254.
17. Abawi LA, Bauman-Buffone C, Pineda-Báez C, Carter S. The rhetoric and reality of leading the inclusive school: Socio-cultural reflections on lived experiences. *Education Sciences*. 2018 Apr 20;8(2):55.
18. Gomez VL. Culturally proficient leadership in urban K-12 schools: Implications for effective leadership practices. University of California, Davis; 2015.
19. Çora H, Mikail EH, Çora AN. The intersection of organizational behavior and international relations: Navigating leadership, culture, and global strategy. *Journal of Organizational Behavior Research*. 2025. [odad.org](https://doi.org/10.21861/odad.org)
20. Ogenyi FC, Eze VH, Ugwu CN. Navigating Challenges and Maximizing Benefits in the Integration of Information and Communication Technology in African Primary Schools. *International Journal of Humanities, Management and Social Science (IJ-HuMaSS)*. 2023 Dec 20;6(2):101-8.
21. Den Hartog DN, De Hoogh AH. Cross-cultural leadership: What we know, what we need to know, and where we need to go. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*. 2024 Jan 22;11(1):535-66. [annualreviews.org](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-01-01-2023-0001)
22. Szymkowiak A, Melović B, Dabić M, Jeganathan K, Kundi GS. Information technology and Gen Z: The role of teachers, the internet, and technology in the education of young people. *Technology in society*. 2021 May 1;65:101565. [\[HTML\]](#)
23. Novianti R, Rusandi MA, Situmorang DD. Internet-based parenting intervention: a systematic review. *Heliyon*. 2023 Mar 1;9(3).
24. Arden C, Okoko JM. Exploring Cross-Cultural Perspectives of Teacher Leadership among the Members of an International Research Team: A Phenomenographic Study. *Research in Educational Administration & Leadership*. 2021 Mar;6(1):51-90. [dergipark.org.tr](https://doi.org/10.21861/dergipark.org.tr)
25. Nwabueze AI, Isilebo NC. Modern trends in educational development. *International and comparative education: Cross-cultural approach*. 2022:545-58. [researchgate.net](https://doi.org/10.21861/researchgate.net)

CITE AS: Neema Amani U. (2025). Cross-Cultural Leadership Practices in Education. IAA Journal of Arts and Humanities 12(1):97-103. <https://doi.org/10.59298/IAAJAH/2025/12197103>