A Comparative Review of Culturally Nuanced School Leadership in the Maldives and China

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Abstract

The manner in which teachers respond to children's learning needs to ensure quality and equitable learning is directly linked to the organisation of the school. School leaders are not merely managers; they are responsible for transforming education to meet the evolving needs of individual communities while considering the role of schools in transmitting culture and community values to future generations. This literature review explores how school leadership is shaped and influenced by socio-cultural, economic, and geographical factors within two distinct Asian cultural contexts: the Maldives and China. By examining the existing gap in understanding and identifying culturally responsive and contextually relevant strategies for principal development, this review provides a culturally nuanced perspective of school leadership that can contribute to advancing the field of school leadership in Asia. The review outlines key themes in existing research on cultural context, roles and responsibilities, leadership styles, curriculum implementation, and cultural nuances in school leadership in the two contexts studied.

Keywords: transformative education, school effectiveness, cultural context, school leadership

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Introduction

For the purpose of this comparative review on culturally nuanced school leadership practices, school leadership is fundamentally characterised as exerting influence to accomplish specific objectives (Wilson, 2023). This practice involves influencing children, teachers, parents, community members, local and district councils, school governors, and policymakers to understand and agree on what needs to be done and how to do it (Yukl, 2020) in order to create an effective learning climate (Daniëls, Hondeghem, & Dochy, 2019). This influence is not unidirectional but reciprocal, exerted through the establishment of strong relationships with key stakeholders and by using that influence to achieve the shared vision and goals of the school. This process enhances equitable and inclusive education, promotes growth for students, teachers, and the community, and fosters innovation and collaboration in the school's organisational processes (Abdul-Raheem, 2023).

School leaders must unite children, families, community members, teachers, and elders by inviting them to collaborate and contribute to the learning process, thereby making education a transformative experience (Paris & Alim, 2017). Adequate cultural knowledge and pedagogical practices are essential for teacher self-efficacy in culturally responsive teaching. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the relationship between cultural contexts and leadership practices in school administration, particularly within the Maldivian context. This gap hinders the development of targeted strategies to address students' and teachers' intellectual, emotional, and social engagement and promote inclusive education that fosters cultural values. According to Hashim, Hassan and Ibrahim (2020), principals should align teachers' interests and skills with their responsibilities, empowering school members and enhancing the quality of education. Similarly, to create a learning organisation, school leaders must reflect on their cultural knowledge, pedagogical skills, and attitudes towards inclusive, equitable education.

By examining the existing gap in understanding and identifying culturally responsive and contextually relevant strategies for school leadership, this review seeks to contribute valuable knowledge that can help advance the field of school leadership from an Asian perspective. The goal is to identify commonalities and differences in school leadership perspectives, focusing on the Maldives and China.

Methodology

The comparative review used academic databases, including ERIC, Elsevier, EBSCO, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The selected articles cover the period from 2010 to 2024, spanning the past fifteen years. The articles were screened based on their titles, abstracts, and full-text reviews to ensure alignment with the research objectives. The review examined educational sources, empirical evidence, and the connections between school leadership and student diversity, emphasising the importance of school leadership in the two cultural contexts. Key themes included the cultural context of schools, the role of school heads in the two education systems, leadership styles, curriculum provision, and the similarities and differences in expectations from school leaders. The synthesised findings were analysed through a thematic approach to identify patterns, gaps, and implications for future research and practice. The review aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of cultural nuances in school leadership in two very different Asian contexts, contributing to the enhancement of educational leadership practices.

Cultural Context of Schools

For this review, culture is defined as a set of shared beliefs, values, behaviours, norms, symbols, and assumptions among individuals within a social group. However, there is an underlying recognition that culture is fluid over time, and adherence to worldviews, beliefs, and practices among youth, family, and elders within a community can be dynamic and in flux at any given time, depending on their educational and social experiences (Gay, 2018). While cultural values are accepted and acknowledged by members, serving as cognitive guides for social behaviour and learning across generations, information technology enables youth to transform and transmit their own fluid perspectives of their cultural knowledge, traditional practices, and language use (Tam, 2015). Similarly, school culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, norms, and practices within a school community that influence behaviour, interactions, and the environment. It affects attitudes toward teaching and learning, staff-student relationships, and the overall educational experience (Ling et al., 2020). School culture is the set of beliefs and values that provide a foundation for everything within a school (Pinchot & Fullan, 2021), and these beliefs, values, and traditions make each school unique (Cogaltay & Karadag, 2016).

Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) refers to an approach that considers children's mother tongues and cultural and historical backgrounds in the design and implementation of curriculum and instruction, assessment practices,

classroom management, and cultural enrichment activities. Research shows that CRT improves student engagement and enhances student learning, particularly for low-achieving students (Gay, 2018). However, test score-driven school cultures in Asia require teachers and school leaders who are cognitively, socially, and emotionally committed to understanding and implementing local culture and community-responsive teaching.

Indian, Arab, and Southeast Asian maritime cultures have all significantly impacted the rich history of the Maldives, the smallest nation in Asia, an archipelagic state in the Indian Ocean (Waheeda, 2022). The islands' origins lie in ancient seafaring populations, leading to a distinctive blending of customs. The strategic placement of the Maldives along ancient trade routes has contributed to the cultural fusion within its civilisation. These cultural factors have significantly influenced the leadership styles and educational framework of the nation. At the same time, the national curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment practices are heavily based on the British school system.

The medium of instruction in almost all of the Maldivian schools is English, except for the teaching of Dhivehi (the national language) and Islam, both of which are taught in Dhivehi. All textbooks for the national curriculum are imported from the United Kingdom, with modifications by national curriculum developers, except for the above two subjects, whose teaching resources are developed nationally. At the secondary level, the formal curriculum is primarily based on preparing students for the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), driven by the popular demand of parents to ensure their children reap the same benefits as the global elite through their education. Although the Maldives has made significant progress in providing access to education, more needs to be done to improve educational quality and equity (Nasir et al., 2022). IGCSE syllabi, which are based on fluency in English language skills and a global metropolitan worldview, can undermine students' sense of belonging and islandness in the Maldivian context. School leadership can be complex in the seafaring island communities of the Maldives, where education is seen as a tool for socio-economic mobility rather than a means of fostering cultural identity, local and national loyalty, and a sense of rootedness in the community (Sodig & Di Biase, 2022).

Chinese students, who comprise approximately one-fifth of the world's school population, attend nine years of compulsory public schooling: six years of primary education followed by three years of lower secondary education in over 250,000 schools. In the Maldives, around 100,000 students attend ten years of compulsory schooling, comprising seven years of primary education and three years of lower secondary education, across about 200 schools spread

over 20 atolls. China is renowned for the academic achievement of its students, who consistently outperform their peers from other developed countries in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). In contrast, approximately 60% of Maldivian school leavers passed the IGCSE examinations in 2018 (Sodiq & Di Biase, 2022), with boys in the atolls consistently underperforming below the average pass rate. Maldivian student performance is relatively low for a middle-income country (Shareef & Shouqee, 2020). Although China also faces disparities in educational provision between rural and urban areas, ongoing initiatives aim to revitalise rural school provision and promote rural development (Liu, 2020).

Understanding the critical role that cultural environments play in influencing leadership practices in educational settings is the fundamental tenet of this review. In high power distance societies like China, principals can influence teachers by fostering a collaborative culture, encouraging public discussions, and providing critiques of teaching while respecting individual community members (Zheng et al., 2019). Traditional values and historical background in China significantly influence leadership practices and educational reforms. Integrating these values with modern initiatives presents challenges, necessitating a nuanced understanding of effective instructional leadership and successful implementation (Qian et al., 2017). China's schools integrate Chinese cultural values with global educational standards, prioritising moral education and student development over academic achievement, focusing on ethical cultivation and collaboration (Wei, 2017).

Ismail, Khatibi, and Azam (2022) explain that professional development for teachers and meaningful in-service programmes for school leaders are crucial for shaping Maldivian school culture. They identified key elements of a positive school culture, including collaborative leadership, teacher collaboration, professional development, unity of purpose, collegial support, and learning partnerships. Schools with strong positive cultures have leaders who foster collaborative two-way dialogue, teachers who work together with each other and with students, continuous professional development, and shared expectations for student achievement. Wang (2016) explained that school culture significantly impacts effectiveness by fostering trust, collaboration, and community among teachers. Trust is crucial for student achievement and cooperative action. A positive culture with shared values and continuous learning leads to improved performance and successful adaptation. Effective leadership supports teaching and learning practices, resulting in improved student outcomes and sustainable institutional improvement. School principals' roles are shaped by culturally varying leadership practices, affecting decision-

making, communication, and community relationships. Understanding and adapting to these nuances is crucial for successful educational management (Lai et al., 2017).

The Role of School Principals in the two Education Systems

School principals in the Maldives are responsible for implementing the national curriculum, shaping teaching strategies, providing necessary in-service training to teachers, obtaining learning resources, and acting as instructional leaders (Fikuree, 2020; Nasir et al., 2022). In addition to their instructional leadership role, principals also have managerial responsibilities. The administration team's duties include maintaining proper record-keeping procedures and providing relevant information to parents, staff, and Ministry of Education officials.

School principals in China are vital in leading educational change and motivating teachers. They balance instructional management with capacity-building activities, creating a supportive environment, adapting leadership practices to local contexts, and aligning school goals with reform objectives (Liu, 2015). Chinese principals are expected to go beyond administrative duties to foster a collaborative environment, build trust among teachers, and create strong group structures, shared values, and positive relationships within the school community (Zheng et al., 2019). They are responsible for facilitating effective teacher collaboration, setting learning goals, and promoting critical dialogue to build trust and improve relationships (Zheng et al., 2016). Additionally, Chinese principals promote equality and equity in learning, addressing demographic challenges, fostering community culture, and meeting students' diverse cultural and linguistic needs. They must implement innovative leadership approaches, foster a welcoming environment, and be flexible in policy implementation (Szeto et al., 2019). In shaping education, Chinese principals influence the values and expectations of millions of students by helping them develop global, national, and local identities to function in a multicultural world while remaining committed to their own ethnic identities.

In the Maldivian educational system, one of the most significant challenges school principals face is balancing administrative responsibilities with promoting a culture of continuous professional development and establishing a learning organisation across the entire school (Rizwan, 2019). They must ensure that all members of the school community have access to a range of professional development activities and effectively monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these initiatives. Additionally, Hashim, Hassan and Ibrahim (2020) argue that collaborating with teachers to develop curriculum integration models and leading the entire school community in a way that ensures every

member has the opportunity to engage in professional development activities presents further challenges. These responsibilities require effective time management and leadership skills to prioritise professional development while managing administrative tasks. This challenge is further exacerbated in island community schools, where principals often work in isolation with limited physical contact with other school leaders to share ideas and network.

Nasir et al. (2022) elaborate on existing challenges, such as the need for principals to provide professional support to teachers, build trusting relationships with staff, and nurture change. Additionally, the quality of teaching and learning needs improvement, as national assessments in primary grades indicate that fifty percent of children's numeracy and literacy skills are below standard, and student enrolment from lower secondary to higher secondary education is inadequate. School heads are expected to demonstrate consistent progress in students' learning. At the same time, community expectations remain skewed towards obtaining high scores in the IGCSE examinations rather than focusing on skill-based learning. The principals' leadership directly affects teachers' performance, impacting student outcomes and the nation's educational aspirations. Therefore, addressing these challenges and enhancing the role of principals is crucial for educational advancement in the Maldives (Nasir et al., 2022).

In general, school principals in both the Maldivian and Chinese education systems are responsible for academic leadership, administrative management, community participation, student welfare, resource allocation, cultural diversity, and technological improvements. They must effectively manage obstacles to create a supportive learning environment for all students in their respective schools.

Research on Leadership Styles

In Chinese research, the school leadership styles studied include transformational leadership (Liu, 2016), instructional leadership (Liu, Li, & Huang, 2022), paternalistic leadership (Lai, Wang, & Shen, 2017), distributed leadership (Liu, 2020), shared leadership, caring leadership, and authentic leadership (Zhang, Long, & Bowers, 2022). In the Maldivian context, the most studied school leadership style is instructional leadership (Ahmed, 2016; Ismail, Khatibi, & Azam, 2020; Shafeeu, 2022).

Transformative education-oriented, learning-centered school leadership positively impacts teachers professional learning, trust, and agency (Liu, Hallinger, & Feng, 2016). Transformational leadership may provide valuable

insights into how school administrators can align their methods with local cultural values, where cultural norms significantly influence societal expectations (Bass & Riggio, 2006). In a study conducted in primary schools in Malé, Maldives, Ngang (2011) found that transformational leadership was practiced to some extent across all schools studied. School heads, teachers, and parents worked together to some degree to achieve common goals, and teachers communicated moderately with parents about student performance. Teachers trusted, shared, and valued each other's ideas and collaborated on new ideas and innovations during professional development sessions. However, teachers' ideas were not highly sought by school heads, nor did teachers engage in critical dialogue with school heads regarding the school's vision and mission. Teachers did not observe each other's teaching practices, and evaluating innovative practices was not expected.

Shi and Li (2008) highlighted that moral modelling is a unique aspect of transformational leadership in the Chinese context, stating that "Confucius believed that fostering individual personality and virtue are the foundations of society" (p. 588). In a qualitative study by Deng (2019), the principal achieved inspirational motivation of teachers to bring about innovative change by using metaphors such as "our family" to describe the school and "our children" to describe the students, noting that such metaphors help make work more meaningful for teachers. In the Maldivian context, the national curriculum framework underscores the central role that schools play in developing Islamic principles, values, and practices in Maldivian children and fostering an understanding and appreciation of Maldivian culture and heritage. The vision is to prepare children for life, enabling them to contribute to family and community life while engaging productively in the modern global society. The transformational leadership approach sets high expectations, provides a positive role model, and promotes collaboration and innovation (Fang et al., 2023). Hence, this area requires further strengthening in the Maldives to achieve national curriculum goals.

A large-scale best evidence synthesis of research by Viviane Robinson (2011) on school leadership demonstrated that leading teacher learning and development had the highest impact on student achievement, ensuring quality teaching, establishing goals and expectations, resourcing strategically, and maintaining an orderly and safe environment. Ahmed (2016) explained that instructional leadership involves leading learning communities where members regularly gather to discuss their work, collaborate to solve problems, reflect on their assignments, and take ownership of the knowledge students acquire. Shafeeu (2019) emphasised that in an effective school, the principal acts as an instructional leader. The principal understands and applies the

characteristics of instructional effectiveness in managing the instructional program, allocating learning resources, and supporting the people, programs, and services required to achieve the school's vision. Shafeeu's (2019) doctoral thesis suggests that principals' instructional leadership is positively correlated with student achievement in the Maldivian context. According to Nasir et al. (2022), Maldivian principals need to focus on instructional leadership practices to enhance school performance. There is a need for a balance between academic results and character development, as the current emphasis on academic results does not align with the holistic education goals of the national curriculum.

Zheng et al. (2019) discussed that instructional leadership is crucial for teacher development, as it encourages principals to actively engage with teachers through observations, feedback, and effective teaching methods. This fosters meaningful interactions, bridging the gap between principals and teachers, and enhances teaching practices and student outcomes by creating authentic learning environments. Instructional leadership involves the role of school principals in supporting teaching and learning activities, developing teacher capacity, and improving student outcomes. It includes defining the school mission, managing the program, and creating a positive learning climate. Research emphasises shared leadership, feedback provision, and data monitoring (Qian et al., 2017).

A study by Zheng, Yin, and Li (2019) suggests that building a strong professional learning community and implementing effective instructional leadership are crucial for improving teaching practices and enhancing Chinese teachers' self-efficacy. In China, school principals employ integrated instructional and transformational leadership styles, focusing on both academic progress and holistic school development. These styles, rooted in cultural values of harmony and collective decision-making, emphasise collaborative approaches (Chen et al., 2022). This is evident in Chinese schools, where dual principalship and the devolution of implementation and monitoring of innovative practices to middle-level leaders are employed (Cunningham, Zhang, Streipe, & Rhodes, 2022; Tang, Bryant, & Walker, 2023).

Distributed leadership styles are evident in both cultural contexts. According to Wang and Tian (2023), distributed leadership involves sharing leadership activities among multiple leaders, promoting collaborative learning and professional development, and fostering overall organisational improvement through decentralisation of control. School leadership that supports shared

decision-making and responsibility among staff members is a key aspect of distributed leadership. Effective educational leadership involves shared decision-making, shared responsibility, and the development of leadership talents across all staff levels. In Chinese schools, distributed leadership includes multiple stakeholders, such as teachers and administrators, in decision-making and problem-solving, thereby enhancing organisational effectiveness. It emphasises informal roles, collaboration, and communication among all members (Mullick et al., 2023).

In Chinese schools, instructional leadership is devolved to middle-level expert teachers, who lead modelling, observation, support, and feedback on teacher capacity development initiatives directed by the school principal. Studies show an authoritarian, benevolent approach in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in Chinese schools (Zheng et al., 2016), where teachers generally prefer high benevolence with low authoritarianism. These PLCs often include Teaching Research Groups (TRGs) in nearly all schools, which are central to developing teacher capacity. Teachers can access teaching studios in other schools for professional learning, as external instructional support and developmental opportunities are available in each school (Tang, Bryant, & Walker, 2023).

In addition to these styles, research by Qian et al. (2021) found that paternalistic leadership is prevalent in Chinese schools. In this approach, leaders are viewed as parental figures who provide guidance, protection, and care to their staff. This style is characterised by authoritarianism, benevolence, and morality. Principals focus on building emotional relationships with teachers, emphasising care, support, and role modelling to foster security and trust. Chinese schools are influenced by collectivism and traditional values, with leaders expected to demonstrate empathy, loyalty, and respect. The development of teachers, concern for their welfare, and understanding of the causes of their underperformance can encourage deep acting in teachers to overcome negative feelings, cope with adverse incidents, and work to improve performance.

Implementation of Curriculum in Culturally Nuanced School Leadership

The Maldives' national curriculum emphasises holistic education to prepare young people for future challenges. However, many school leaders prioritise improving academic results over holistic education. This focus on examination scores and ratings negatively impacts student perceptions and motivation, particularly for those who are not exam-oriented nor skilled in exam preparation. Students often prefer commerce and business studies, where

higher grades are more attainable, leading to fewer graduates in the natural sciences. This results in a shortage of outstanding science teachers and a lack of demand by parents and students for science and humanities subjects. Additionally, vocational education is often viewed as inferior, compounded by a lack of resources and unavailability of skilled teachers for vocational subjects. Maldivian principals require professional support to enhance instructional leadership and school management (Nasir et al., 2022). Principals, who are often human resource management professionals, may also lack the expertise to lead school curriculum development across both primary and secondary levels (Ahmed, 2016). According to the Maldives' national curriculum framework (2015), school principals are responsible for directing and managing academic and non-academic activities within the school community by strategically deploying available resources.

China's centralised education system is overseen by the Ministry of Education (MOE), which sets policies and develops the national curriculum. The curriculum, which includes Chinese language, mathematics, science, and moral education, is adapted locally but closely monitored to ensure national standards are met (Shan, 2022). Chinese education policy focuses on academic achievement, strengthening natural science provision, and providing access to vocational training after nine years of compulsory education. Principals are tasked with identifying their schools' unique strengths and developing development plans while adhering to government curriculum norms. They have limited autonomy due to national curriculum and test restrictions and rely on teacher leaders to inspire students. Traditional mentorship and peer observation methods are emphasised. Principals engage in de-privatised instruction by opening their classrooms for shared scrutiny and study, welcoming visitors, and participating in routine lesson observations to maintain consistency and establish work standards (Walker et al., 2022). Chinese teachers value questioning from students and tailor teaching based on individual aptitudes and dispositions, reflecting ancient Confucian principles of education (Feng, 2020).

The Maldives' and China's education systems are highly centralised, with strict national control over curriculum and teaching materials. The Ministry of Education (MOE) closely monitors curriculum implementation in China, ensuring uniformity and adherence to national standards. Similarly, the Maldivian government oversees student performance through centralised records of formative and summative assessments across the country. Although national policies in both countries advocate for student-centered pedagogical approaches, the emphasis on high-stakes test scores remains strong. These scores are crucial for university entrance, which drives students and parents to prioritise exam results over other aspects of education.

Similar to their Chinese counterparts, Maldivian principals also face limitations in curriculum management autonomy despite this autonomy being a predictor of improved student performance. To recognise culturally relevant teaching, school leaders must focus on curriculum leadership by mastering curriculum design techniques, independently planning and creatively implementing the national curriculum to meet students' learning needs and evaluating the curriculum for effectiveness. Without this focus, the potential benefits of curriculum autonomy cannot be fully realised (Zhao & Wang, 2020).

In the Maldivian context, Nasir et al. (2022) highlight a significant issue: the lack of mutually supportive accountability and regular monitoring and evaluation of reform initiatives at the policy level. Although student performance is reported to the Ministry of Education and tracked over several school years, the monitoring and evaluation processes are weak. When public access is permitted, the focus tends to be on successes rather than to identify and to address areas which need improvement. In contrast, accountability for school principals in China is very high, with annual monitoring and evaluation ensuring rigorous oversight (Zhao & Wang, 2020).

Similarities and Differences in School Leadership in the Two Contexts

In the Maldives, the senior management team (SMT) in schools consists of the principal, deputy principal, and lead teachers. Regardless of the school size, these positions are all full-time and appointed by the Ministry of Education. The number of senior management staff is determined by the size of the school: one deputy principal is assigned to schools with enrollments exceeding 500 students, and an additional deputy principal is appointed for schools with enrollments exceeding 1,000 students (Fikuree, 2020).

Similarly, in China, principals, vice principals, and teachers are appointed by the government and are accountable to the superior administrative department. Principals must manage their schools in accordance with the regulations set by this department. Chinese principals have more autonomy in budget allocation compared to their Maldivian counterparts, who must apply for funds and have expenditures controlled by the central government. Chinese schools also have the option to use private funds to employ both teaching and non-teaching staff. This contrasts with Maldivian schools, where funding is more centralised and tightly regulated.

In Chinese schools, principals have relatively low decision-making power, with school councils holding significant authority, reflecting a collective decision-making approach (Zhao & Wang, 2020). In contrast, decision-making power

in Maldivian schools primarily resides with the principal, who consults with Ministry of Education officials. Additionally, Chinese schools employ legal vice principals, who play a dual role by teaching patriotic, moral, and citizenship education in alignment with the ruling political party's directives (Cunningham, Zhang, Streipe, & Rhodes, 2022). These vice principals, often from legal or law enforcement backgrounds, collaborate with the school principal and address issues such as bullying, violence, and abuse prevention.

In China, culturally nuanced leadership emphasises adapting approaches to align with community values and practices, incorporating cultural traditions such as Confucianism to ensure effective leadership in diverse settings (Mullick et al., 2023). Chinese culture, characterised by high power distance, collectivism, and Confucian dynamics, significantly influences school leadership, teacher development, and reform management within a top-down system.

School leaders in the culturally diverse settings of Chinese schools' face challenges in balancing traditional values with modern practices, requiring effective trust-building among staff from diverse backgrounds to create a harmonious learning environment (Qian et al., 2021). They must navigate the complexities of varied cultural backgrounds within the school community while addressing potential resistance to change based on cultural norms (Chen et al., 2022), especially amidst ongoing educational reforms and policy changes (Szeto et al., 2019). These leaders grapple with understanding and addressing cultural differences among students, teachers, and staff, striving to balance traditional practices with cultural sensitivity and inclusivity. Ongoing challenges include overcoming biases, promoting cultural competence, and fostering a sense of belonging (Fang et al., 2023). Despite these obstacles, opportunities exist to enhance culturally sensitive school leadership in China by incorporating Confucian ideals of respect, hierarchy, and collectivism, thereby fostering a positive environment and implementing culturally tailored reforms (Qian et al., 2017).

A study by Ahmed, Chowdhury, and Salik (2021) recommended that education ministries prioritise enhancing teachers' ICT skills to align with global curricula. Collaboration between local schools and training centers can be beneficial in developing teachers. Department heads and principals should conduct in-house training, utilising teachers' feedback to revise professional development policies in the education sector. Abdul-Raheem (2023) supports the idea of collaboration with international educational institutions, leveraging technology for flexible online learning, and securing government support for professional development as opportunities for investment and improvement. Challenges present opportunities to harness cultural diversity for innovative problem-

solving and decision-making, enhancing school effectiveness and fostering community engagement through culturally responsive leadership strategies (Chen et al., 2022). Culturally nuanced school leadership leverages diversity to create an inclusive learning environment, improving communication, collaboration, and mutual respect. This approach can lead to enhanced academic outcomes, increased engagement, and a greater sense of belonging (Fang et al., 2023).

In summary, school principals face multifaceted challenges that demand innovative solutions, including addressing resource limitations, cultural differences, and integrating technological advancements. Both in the Maldives and China, principals must navigate the delicate balance between maintaining harmony, respecting hierarchical values, and fostering professional growth among teachers to achieve academic success. In the Maldives, IGCSE outcomes may not fully reflect the achievements of students who have been diverted into vocational subjects or have not taken these exams, underscoring the need for culturally nuanced, equitable education that meets the diverse needs of all students. Strategic utilisation of resources, like sharing and networking within schools and co-creating resources with students, parents, and community members, can empower principals to lead culturally responsive schools. This approach ensures the transmission of cultural values while equipping students with the skills needed to transform their world for a more equitable and just future.

Recommendations for Future Research and Policy Implementations

Policy implementations should prioritise cultural sensitivity training for school leaders to enhance their ability to manage diverse educational environments effectively. Collaboration between policymakers, educators, and community members is essential for developing culturally responsive policies. Incorporating cultural competency training into professional development programs is crucial for improving school principals' ability to lead in accordance with local cultural values. By equipping leaders with skills to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives, schools can better address the needs of their communities and foster an inclusive educational environment. This approach supports both the effective transmission of cultural values and the preparation of students to contribute meaningfully to a more equitable and just society.

Future research should investigate the impact of cultural values on leadership practices and teacher-student relationships across various educational contexts. This research can provide insights into how cultural norms influence inclusivity and equity in schools. In the Maldivian context, where research is

limited and often confined to postgraduate studies, there is a need for more comprehensive school-based research and innovation. Policymakers should encourage action research and the publication of findings to drive positive transformations and equitable educational reforms. Enhanced collaboration and communication within and between schools, similar to practices observed in Chinese schools, can foster a more inclusive and effective educational environment.

Additionally, research and policy initiatives should investigate the correlation between leadership styles and student performance and develop culturally sensitive practices. School principals should receive professional development opportunities focusing on cultural diversity and inclusive practices. The accountability practices of school principals and their impact need further investigation in both contexts explored in this study.

By focusing on these areas, researchers and policymakers can collaborate to enhance the quality of educational leadership, which will lead to improved student outcomes and a stronger education system.

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