Insights from Culturally Sustaining Leadership: A Hybrid Leadership model for a Chinese International School

Author and Affiliation

Xingbin Zhu, Centre for Global Learning, Coventry University, Coventry, UK & Deakin University, School of Arts and Education, Melbourne, Australia (Cotutelle)

Corresponding Author Email

Xingbin Zhu zhux54@coventry.ac.uk

Abstract

This article proposes an innovative leadership practice designed to address the challenges of dual-management structures in international schools in China. Grounded in the principles of Culturally Sustaining Leadership (CSL), the proposed "hybrid leadership model" moves beyond merely managing cultural differences to proactively leveraging them for institutional improvement. This is an interpretive case study drawing on firsthand observations as an insider-practitioner in a Chongqing international school, an institution characterised by a cross-border collaboration involving a Chinese principal and Western academic leaders. The study details a specific strategic initiative—the "US Track Language Plan," where deep-seated conflicts arose from divergent pedagogical approaches—student-centred versus standards-based instruction. The intervention involved establishing structured working groups to facilitate cross-cultural dialogue and co-construct solutions in the context of dual-management international schools. The key insight is the creation of a "third space" for dialogue that resulted in a synthesised curriculum and hybrid assessment plan superior to what either side could develop independently. The objective is to provide a practical, reflective framework for school administrators to navigate complex cultural dynamics, foster collaborative decision-making, and ultimately enhance educational quality in cross-cultural settings.

Keywords

1. Hybrid leadership model
2. Culturally sustaining leadership
3. Cross-cultural leadership
4. International schools
5. Educational leadership

AI Declaration

Conflict of Interest

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the establishment of international and bilingual schools throughout China. This development has given rise to a distinctive educational eco-system, wherein Eastern and Western educational practices are converging. A hallmark of numerous such institutions is the implementation of a dual-leadership model, which, while amalgamating complementary expertise, often gives rise to cultural conflicts stemming from divergent communication norms, authority perceptions, and educational philosophies. These discrepancies can frequently engender inefficiencies and friction, which can exert a direct impact on the quality of teaching and learning (Van Meurs & Spencer-Oatey, 2010). This article introduces and reflects upon an innovative practice—the Hybrid Leadership Model—developed by the author as an insider-practitioner to actively bridge these cultural divides and transform conflict into constructive collaboration within a Chinese international school setting.

Problem Statement and Contextual Review

Defining the Cross-Border Collaboration

The research site is a Chongqing international school, operating under a dual-leadership model that embodies a specific form of cross-border collaboration: a Chinese entity that recruits and employs expatriate academic leadership to deliver an international curriculum. This arrangement is characterized by a high degree of structural interdependence (Wu & Koh, 2022) between the Chinese Principal (focused primarily on administrative oversight, external relations, and financial governance) and the Western academic leaders (responsible for curriculum delivery, pedagogical quality, and staff development). The challenge is often conceptualized as "dual-cultured leadership," where leaders struggle to fuse Western policies with local cultural values (Cunningham et al., 2022).

Impetus for Innovation

This study addresses the pragmatic issue of cultural conflict in the dual-leadership structure. As a school leader, I have observed how cultural differences complicate even routine leadership decisions, such as providing critical performance feedback to local teachers or setting priority items for weekly management agendas. In such cases, the conventional approach to business operations became complicated by expatriate inputs that favoured direct, low-context confrontation. This approach often clashed with local preferences for indirect harmony-saving, leading to chronic conflict avoidance rather than resolution. The present study posits that a structured hybrid leadership model is essential for the

transformation of these cultural frictions into a collaborative engine for institutional growth and pedagogical excellence.

Extant literature on this topic has frequently identified these cross-cultural challenges from the perspective of expatriates (Cutri et al., 2024). They, for instance, report on expatriate perceptions of leadership in Chinese schools, focusing on the cultural clashes experienced when delivering a Western curriculum. Moreover, some indicate that foreign expatriates, including teachers and teacher leaders, encounter significant cultural barriers in Chinese international schools (Deng & Gibson, 2009; Golis et al., 2024). Specifically, local leadership is often driven by profit and local work culture, with foreign expatriates feeling marginalised and responding to management dissatisfaction by leaving their positions. However, whilst these studies have highlighted the symptoms of cultural conflict, a significant gap persists in practitioner-led research that offers practical solutions for the collaborative construction of successful leadership at this cultural nexus (Shuping, 2025). The position held by the author, that of both scholar and insider practitioner, offers a unique vantage point from which to explore the implementation of a novel leadership model designed to directly resolve these decision-making conflicts.

Literature Review

The Hybrid Leadership Model emerges as a sophisticated response to the complex tensions in global educational leadership, specifically addressing the challenges of balancing local and international educational contexts. Studies on global schooling often highlight the tension between localizing curriculum and adhering to international standards (Law, 2012). Such misalignments have the potential to engender inefficiencies, interpersonal friction, and ultimately, to jeopardise the quality of teaching and learning (Van Meurs & Spencer-Oatey, 2010). Culturally responsive leadership models have been proposed to manage these tensions but often focus on serving diverse student populations rather than resolving conflicts within the leadership structure itself.

Tian (2020) developed this model through interviews with Chinese university presidents. The model demonstrates how leaders can navigate diverse and potentially conflicting local and global demands. The model is characterised by global competency, multiple cultural mindsets and adaptable geographical skills. Dimmock and Walker (2000) emphasise that a culturally responsive approach is vital in providing policymakers and practitioners with insights and recommendations. Amani (2025) further reinforces the complexity of transferring leadership practices across borders, emphasising the innovative approach of the Hybrid Leadership Model to resolving internal leadership tensions. While the evidence is limited to a few studies, it provides a promising framework for understanding cross-cultural educational leadership in an increasingly globalised context.

The need for a new framework is driven by the observation that, even when adapted for a global context, traditional leadership models often fail to account for deep-seated cultural value conflicts between high-context (Chinese) and low-context (Western) professional communication norms (Clark and Eckhardt, 2003). Therefore, a model is required that acknowledges these differences and actively seeks to sustain the cultural and linguistic assets of both Eastern and Western cultures within the leadership structure itself.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The innovation proposed in this study is the conceptualisation and development of a hybrid leadership model, deeply informed by the evolving framework of Culturally Sustaining Leadership (CSL) (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016). This model transcends the mere management of cultural differences, instead advocating for the proactive promotion and integration of cultural and linguistic diversity as a catalyst for enhancing equity (Woodgate, 2023) and school improvement.

Seminal works on leadership theories, such as transformational leadership—which emphasises a shared vision and individualised support—and distributed leadership—which views leadership as a shared, collaborative practice—provide foundational insights (Bass and Riggio, 2006). However, it is imperative to acknowledge the necessity for these principles to be adapted to the specific cultural context (Gay, 2015; Gibson, 2024). In the Chinese context, Philip Hallinger et al., (2017) affirmed the "necessity for cultural adaptation of 'Western' curricula and tools," (p. 1) showing that imported educational frameworks require careful local modification. For international schools more broadly, Fisher et al., 2021 found that leaders who understand their cultural context are "more likely to choose appropriate and effective leadership behaviours" (p. 1). As Clark and Eckhardt's (2003) seminal work on cultural dimensions demonstrates, there is considerable potential for value conflicts to arise between Western and Chinese norms. This underscores the notion that effective leadership must be adaptive and responsive to its unique environment.

The challenge, particularly in China, is often conceptualised as "dual-cultured leadership," where leaders struggle to fuse Western policies with local cultural values (Cunningham et al., 2022). The hybrid leadership model adapts CSL principles to the Chinese international school context by focusing on three key principles: proactive cultural integration, enhanced cultural intelligence and collaborative decision-making.

Proactive Cultural Integration

Rather than acknowledging cultural differences in world view, the model emphasises the deliberate and proactive integration of Eastern and Western educational philosophies and leadership practices. This process entails the identification of complementary strengths from both paradigms and their deliberate integration into a cohesive operational framework (Dimmock & Walker, 2000). The Hybrid Leadership Model places primary emphasis on professional practice integration (blending and adapting communication, decision-making, and management styles among the leadership team) as the most pertinent dimension for overcoming daily operational conflicts. This process entails the harmonisation and adaptation of communication, decision-making, and management styles among the leadership team.

This fundamental approach enables integration across the other essential domains, namely curricular/assessment integration and policy integration. The concept of curricular/assessment integration can be defined as the synthesis of pedagogical values and evaluation methods. This process is explored in detail within the case study. Policy integration may be defined as the process of combining governance and administrative styles into a consolidated school policy framework.

Enhanced Cultural Intelligence

The concept of 'Enhanced Cultural Intelligence' is of particular interest in this context. The model prioritises the development of high "Cultural Intelligence" among leaders, defined as the ability to operate effectively across diverse cultural settings (Livermore et al., 2022). This encompasses fostering self-awareness of one's own cultural biases, cultivating an understanding of other cultures, and adapting leadership behaviours accordingly.

Collaborative Decision-Making

Collaboration is an integral component of the research process, facilitating the exchange of ideas and expertise among researchers, thereby enhancing the overall quality and impact of research outcomes. The implementation of structured, mandated protocols is imperative to ensure the direct exchange and integration of diverse ideas, thereby ensuring that all outcomes are co-constructed and functionally incorporate the strengths of divergent professional communication and management styles.

Design and Methodology

The present piece employs a qualitative, interpretivist paradigm, which enables the researcher to utilise their "own interests and understandings to help interpret the expressed views and behaviour of others" (Thomas, 2009, pp. 109). This approach is ideal for achieving a profound, contextualised comprehension of the subjective interpretations and socially constructed realities of leadership within a particular context.

Case Study Approach and Data Sources

While not a formal research study with primary data collection, this submission is grounded in the observations and insights of an insider-practitioner. The process of developing and reflecting on this innovative practice can be likened to a single-site, instrumental case study, where the "case" is the implementation of the hybrid leadership model in a real-world setting. The site is a pseudonymised "Chongqing International School," where I serve as an academic leader. To provide a bounded context for observing the practice, I focused on the implementation of the "US Track Language Plan." My observations and reflections were generated through a process of informal triangulation, gathering insights from three sources: participant observation, document analysis and informal conversations.

As a member of the school's Academic and Policy Committees, I undertook participant observation of eight key meetings during the four-month development cycle of the language plan. These observations were conducted on a bi-weekly basis, thereby enabling the tracking of evolving dynamics between local and expatriate leaders. A detailed record of field notes was made during each session, with a particular focus on non-verbal cues, interruptions, and the language used to justify pedagogical choices. Subsequent to each meeting, these preliminary impressions were expanded into a reflective journal, wherein specific interactions were mapped against the CSL framework to identify emerging patterns of cultural friction or integration.

Meanwhile, I analysed key institutional documents, including the "US Track Language Plan" itself, relevant policy revisions, and meeting minutes. These documents provided context and a formal record of the decisions being made, which I could then compare against my qualitative observations. My role as an insider-practitioner allowed for numerous

informal conversations with colleagues—both Chinese and Western academic leaders and educators. These conversations provided rich, anecdotal data on their perceptions and experiences, offering valuable insights into the subjective realities of the cross-cultural environment.

Addressing Bias and Evidence of Change

My insider status, while granting unique access, also presented ethical complexities related to power dynamics and role conflict, as described by Mercer (2007). I addressed this by maintaining a rigorous, self-reflective stance, constantly questioning my own biases and interpretations to ensure the observations were as objective as possible. For instance, during the "US Track Language Plan" discussions, I questioned my own inclination towards the Western-influenced, project-based approach to ensure I fully comprehended the Chinese leaders' rationale concerning grammar and standardised test preparation.

The reflective analysis of the observations and documents was guided by Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2023). The RTA was selected on the basis that it acknowledges the researcher's active and interpretative function in knowledge generation, a pivotal element in this insider-practitioner case study. The process entailed the systematic identification of key themes and patterns across the observational data, with a focus on how the author's cultural perspective influenced the interpretation of events. As a local leader engaging with both Eastern and Western practices, I purposefully adopted a reflective stance throughout the evaluation of the analytical process. This was done to ensure that my own voice remained grounded in a critical awareness of the school's unique cultural nexus.

The transition from a conflict-averse approach to a constructive dialogue was evident in the structured protocols that were implemented in the working groups. Initially, the discord was profound and culturally motivated. However, the novel process, which necessitated that participants first articulate their own cultural-pedagogical assumptions prior to the presentation of their proposals, transitioned the discourse from a debate over methods to a shared exploration of values. The resulting co-constructed solution – the hybrid curriculum and assessment plan – served as the final, observable evidence of a productive mood change and resolution.

The Hybrid Leadership Model: Conceptualisation and Practice

The implementation of the hybrid leadership model, as evidenced by the "US Track Language Plan," has been demonstrated to be highly effective in several key areas. Effectiveness is defined by the model's success in achieving its core objective: facilitating the resolution of cultural differences with a view to enhancing school improvement. For instance, a primary point of contention was the pedagogical approach to language acquisition. Western academic leaders, influenced by student-centred learning philosophies, advocated for a curriculum with a strong emphasis on communicative competence, critical thinking, and project-based learning. The proposed assessments were to be based on a combination of debating, oral presentation and creative writing portfolios. The Chinese leaders, coming from a background that values foundational knowledge and rigorous practice, were concerned that this approach lacked sufficient attention to grammar,

vocabulary retention, and the structured preparation required for standardized tests like the SAT, IELTs or TOEFL. The proposed solution emphasised a more conventional, teacher-directed approach, characterised by explicit standards and periodic summative assessments. This disagreement was not merely a difference in opinion; rather, it was indicative of a cultural clash rooted in divergent educational philosophies. Western leaders perceived the Chinese approach as excessively rigid and potentially stifling to student creativity, while Chinese leaders viewed the Western proposal as lacking in academic rigour and potentially leaving students unprepared for future academic challenges. The hybrid leadership model provided a framework to overcome this impasse. It is important to note that no particular approach was favoured over another. Instead, the model's fundamental principles were applied:

Shift to Constructive Dialogue

The model functioned as a practical instrument, engendering a more collaborative and culturally intelligent environment. This led to a visible shift from conflict avoidance to active, constructive dialogue. Cultural differences became a catalyst for robust discussion and the development of more nuanced solutions. A series of four working groups were established, comprising both Chinese and Western academic leaders. These meetings aimed to facilitate exploration of the underlying philosophies of language acquisition in a safe and neutral space. The present study employed structured protocols, wherein participants were required to first articulate their own cultural-pedagogical assumptions prior to the presentation of their proposals. This process elucidated the underlying rationales for each approach, thereby transitioning the discourse from a debate over methods to a shared exploration of values.

Co-Construct Solutions

Rather than presenting a finalised plan, the academic leaders from both sides engaged in a collaborative, iterative process to construct the plan. The hybrid model enabled the synthesis of these approaches, creating a curriculum that balanced foundational knowledge with practical application and communicative skills. The final plan incorporated the Western leaders' proposal for project-based learning, while also addressing the Chinese leaders' requirement for rigour by incorporating a structured vocabulary and grammar programme. This co-constructed solution, specifically the hybrid assessment plan, integrated both a portfolio to track growth from expatriates and a structured final project to simulate a high-stakes scenario seen from local Chinese perspectives. This solution proved to be of a standard that was superior to what either side would have been capable of developing independently.

Iterative Reflection

The model encouraged ongoing reflection from both the leaders and me throughout the process. The leaders were prompted to consider their own cultural assumptions and the extent to which these were shaping their views on the plan's objectives and methods. This continuous reflective process was found to be instrumental in the prevention of misunderstandings from escalating into conflicts. The evidence for this prevention was often

found in the spontaneous conversations that occurred during working groups; for example, one expatriate academic leader remarked during a tense debate on assessment, "I realize now that my push for 'creative freedom' sounds like a lack of rigour to you, rather than a pedagogical choice." The outcome of this collaborative effort was a curriculum that far surpassed the sum of its constituent parts, representing a synthesis that met the dual demands of preparing students for both Western academic settings and the realities of the Chinese educational system. Evidence that the model successfully balanced these dual demands was found not only in the final curriculum document itself but in the following semester's internal assessment data, which showed higher student engagement in project-based tasks alongside consistent performance in standardized grammar and vocabulary benchmarks. Furthermore, the commitment to this co-constructed framework was reflected in a significantly lower staff turnover rate within the department; while staff continue to leave for various personal or relocation reasons, the rate of attrition among key teachers involved in the US Track Language Plan decreased markedly compared to previous years, with many citing the "newfound professional respect and clarity" as a primary reason for their decision to commit to another academic year. The model is primarily enacted through a series of working meetings, where the CSL principles—specifically the proactive integration of diversity—guide the facilitation process.

Case Study: Application to the US Track Language Plan

The conflict addressed by the Hybrid Leadership Model emerged during the design of the "US Track Language Plan," a strategic initiative intended to standardize English language instruction across the school. The core dispute was pedagogical: expatriate teachers advocated for a student-centred, project-based assessment approach emphasizing creative application, while local Chinese leaders insisted on a standards-based, summative assessment structure emphasizing grammatical accuracy and preparation for high-stakes exams.

The Intervention

The intervention involved hosting three dedicated working group meetings over a period of two weeks. Each group consisted of six members: three Chinese academic coordinators and three Western department heads. Their task was to co-construct a unified assessment policy for the US Track Language Plan. The aims of the workshops, derived from the CSL framework, were threefold:
1. Establish Mutual Understanding - Establish mutual understanding of the cultural logic behind each pedagogical approach (Proactive Cultural Integration).
2. Develop a Shared Language - Develop a shared language for discussing instructional excellence (Enhanced Cultural Intelligence).
3. Produce Synthesized Outcomes - Produce a synthesized, superior assessment policy (Collaborative Decision-Making).

Outcome and Recommendations

The most significant outcome was the recommendations that emerged: a hybrid lesson plan

and assessment policy. This plan integrated both portfolio assessment (the expatriate-favoured tool to track growth and creative application) and a structured final project with clear, standardized rubrics (the locally favoured tool simulating a high-stakes scenario). This solution was explicitly developed through the new protocol and demonstrated a successful synthesis that satisfied the core values of both groups.

Discussion: Effectiveness, Gains, and Drawbacks

The implementation of the hybrid leadership model, as evidenced by the "US Track Language Plan," has been demonstrated to be "highly effective in several key areas" (leader A, personal communication, August 28, 2024). The innovation functioned not only as a theoretical framework but also as a practical instrument that engendered a more collaborative and culturally intelligent environment. The most notable outcome was a visible shift from conflict avoidance to active, constructive dialogue. Instead of cultural differences resulting in conflict, they became the catalyst for robust discussion and the development of more nuanced solutions.

It is evident that one of the most efficacious components was the deliberate creation of a "third space" for dialogue. The designated working groups provided a neutral ground on which leaders could articulate their cultural viewpoints without fear of causing offence. For instance, during deliberations on the matter of assessment, Western leaders initially proposed a portfolio-based, continuous assessment model. In a conventional context, this could be interpreted as a lack of concern for the rigour of high-stakes, summative assessments. However, through the collaborative construction process, the Chinese leaders articulated their concern that a purely portfolio-based system might not adequately prepare students for the demands of standardised tests required for university applications. This initiative gave rise to a hybrid assessment plan that integrated both a portfolio to track growth and a structured final project to simulate a high-stakes scenario. The purpose of this integration was to prepare students for both the demands of Western universities and traditional Eastern academic expectations. It was demonstrated that the solution of creating "third space" in question was of a standard that was superior to that which would have been capable of being developed independently by either side.

However, the model also highlighted areas for improvement. While the leadership team's cultural intelligence appeared to have enhanced, the process of cascading this understanding to the broader faculty proved more challenging. The enhancement of the leadership team's cultural intelligence was manifest in novel, discernible conduct during subsequent strategic meetings. For instance, Western leaders commenced the utilisation of "cultural paraphrasing"—the explicit inquiry, "In this context, is my directness being interpreted as an instruction or a suggestion?" (leader B, personal communication, December 14, 2024)—while local Chinese leaders transitioned from defensive silence to "curious questioning," seeking the pedagogical rationale behind expatriate proposals rather than presupposing a clash of authority. However, despite these advancements within the inner circle, the nuanced understandings developed in the working groups were often lost when communicated as finished policies to teachers, who lacked the transformative experience of the structured dialogue sessions. The model's reliance on collaborative, consensus-building processes was found to be time-consuming, and some staff members expressed frustration with the pace of decision-making. Subsequent iterations of the model should concentrate on the streamlining of these processes and the development of a

comprehensive professional development programme for all faculty members, with a view to enhancing their cultural intelligence and communication skills. It is recommended that further consideration be given to the management of these resulting drawbacks, as this could provide valuable and insightful insights for other practitioners, rather than focusing on a specific model.

Conclusions

This innovative leadership practice, conceptualised as a hybrid leadership model and grounded in Culturally Sustaining Leadership, has been demonstrated to be effective in managing the complexities of a dual-management international school in China. The study, an insider-practitioner case study at a Chongqing international school with a dual-management structure, offers a robust, reflective framework for navigating complex cross-cultural dynamics. The intervention, which involved structured cross-cultural working groups for the "US Track Language Plan," demonstrated that a proactive, culturally sustaining approach is not merely an aspirational objective, but rather a pragmatic and efficacious framework for dual-management international schools. The model's success is evidenced by the shift from conflict avoidance to constructive, collaborative dialogue and the co-construction of a superior, synthesised collaboration. While not a panacea, and future work must address the challenges of time-consuming processes and cascading cultural understanding to the wider faculty, it provides school leaders with a compelling pathway for fostering a more integrated, equitable, and effective educational environment. This study offers actionable insights directly informing the work of expatriate and local practitioners in the rapidly evolving international and bilingual educational ecosystem of southwestern China.

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