

Equity-Centered Leadership and Culturally Responsive Learning in Malaysian International Schools: The Mediating Role of DEIJB

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Abstract

This study examined how equity-centered leadership supports culturally responsive learning in Malaysian international schools and whether Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Justice, and Belonging (DEIJB) provides the institutional pathway through which leadership practices affect learning. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey was administered to 390 teachers, school leaders, and administrators. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and partial least squares structural equation modeling. The measurement model demonstrated satisfactory composite reliability and convergent validity. Of the four leadership dimensions, only leadership diversity had a significant direct relationship with culturally responsive learning. Leadership recruitment, curriculum development, and leadership training were not directly significant. Equity-centered leadership strongly predicted DEIJB. Mediation analysis showed significant indirect effects for leadership recruitment, leadership training, and leadership diversity, whereas the indirect effect of curriculum development was not significant. Overall, five hypotheses were supported and four were not supported. The findings position DEIJB as a central institutional mechanism connecting leadership decisions with culturally responsive practice in multicultural schools. International schools should therefore embed cultural competence, anti-bias awareness, inclusive communication, and justice-oriented decision-making in recruitment, professional development, leadership representation, and school accountability systems.

Keywords: Equity-Centered Leadership, Deijb, Culturally Responsive Learning, International Schools, Malaysia

Introduction

International schools are often described as sites of global learning, yet their daily work is grounded in particular cultural, linguistic, and social settings. Students may study an international curriculum, learn through English or another transnational language, and move between national systems, while also bringing local histories, family expectations, religions, languages, and identities into the classroom. This combination creates valuable opportunities for intercultural learning, but it also places unusual demands on school leadership. A global mission does not by itself ensure that students experience recognition, participation, or educational fairness.

Malaysia offers a particularly important setting for examining these demands. Its international schools serve culturally diverse communities and employ teachers and leaders with varied national and professional backgrounds. Research with international school leaders in Malaysia has shown that cultural difference influences communication, conflict management, staff relations, and the creation of a productive learning environment (Adams & Velarde, 2021). At the same time, international schools commonly work within British, American, Australian, Cambridge, or International Baccalaureate frameworks. These systems offer global portability and quality assurance, but their implementation can produce tension when externally designed programmes are insufficiently connected to Malaysian and wider Asian realities. Leadership challenges associated with international programme implementation in the Asia-Pacific region demonstrate that curriculum change is shaped by institutional capacity, professional learning, and local context rather than by programme adoption alone (Lee et al., 2012).

This challenge is pedagogical as well as organizational. Culturally responsive learning treats students' cultural knowledge, language, experience, and identity as resources for rigorous learning rather than as peripheral background information. It requires teachers to maintain high expectations, build meaningful relationships, connect content to students' lives, and help learners examine how knowledge and power are organized (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015; Paris & Alim, 2017). Such practice cannot be sustained only through the commitment of individual teachers. Timetabling, staffing, professional development, curriculum policy, family engagement, and resource allocation all shape what teachers are able to do.

Equity-centered leadership addresses this institutional level. It asks leaders to identify patterned barriers, examine how apparently neutral routines affect different groups, and redistribute opportunity, voice, and support where needed. Culturally responsive school leadership similarly extends leadership beyond administrative efficiency to include critical self-reflection, community engagement, culturally responsive teacher development, and the reform of inequitable school structures (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). Transformative leadership adds an explicit concern with power and social justice, emphasizing that meaningful inclusion depends on changes to organizational assumptions and practices, not only statements of intent (Shields & Hesbol, 2020).

In this article, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Justice, and Belonging (DEIJB) is treated as the institutional culture through which equity commitments become part of everyday school life. Diversity concerns representation; equity concerns fair access and support; inclusion concerns participation and influence; justice concerns the examination and correction of

structural disadvantage; and belonging concerns whether people experience themselves as accepted, valued members of the school. These elements are analytically distinct but mutually reinforcing. Inclusion is systemic when policies, relationships, and decision processes enable people to contribute without suppressing meaningful difference (Ferdman, 2014). Belonging likewise requires more than proximity to difference; it requires institutional practices that interrupt othering and widen membership (Powell & Menendian, 2016).

Previous scholarship has generated substantial insight into equity-oriented leadership, inclusive organizational culture, and culturally responsive pedagogy. However, these strands are often examined separately. Leadership studies commonly focus on leader dispositions or organizational change, while culturally responsive learning is frequently treated as a classroom-level practice. Less attention has been given to the mechanism connecting leadership decisions to culturally responsive learning, especially in Malaysian international schools. This study addresses that gap by testing DEIJB as a mediator between four dimensions of equity-centered leadership—leadership recruitment, curriculum development, leadership training, and leadership diversity—and culturally responsive learning. It contributes an institution-level explanation of how leadership may influence pedagogy directly and through the culture that gives equity commitments practical force.

Literature Review

Equity-Centered Leadership

Equity-centered leadership begins with the recognition that equal treatment can reproduce unequal outcomes when students and staff face different barriers, forms of recognition, or access to institutional resources. The approach therefore differs from generic supportive leadership. It requires leaders to examine disaggregated experiences, question whose knowledge and interests shape school routines, and respond to inequity through concrete changes in staffing, curriculum, professional learning, discipline, participation, and resource allocation. Equity literacy is especially relevant because it directs attention away from explanations that locate disadvantage in students and toward the institutional conditions that create or sustain it (Gorski, 2019).

In diverse schools, this work involves both personal and structural practice. Leaders need the capacity to reflect on their own cultural assumptions, but reflection matters only when it changes decisions and relationships. Khalifa (2018) argues that culturally responsive leadership combines critical self-awareness with responsiveness to students and communities, culturally responsive teacher development, and the creation of inclusive school environments. Similarly, Khalifa et al. (2016) show that leadership for culturally responsive schooling operates across organizational domains rather than as a single programme. Equity-focused leadership therefore becomes visible in who is recruited, whose expertise is developed, how curriculum decisions are made, and who shares authority.

Four dimensions are central to the model tested here. Leadership recruitment concerns whether selection processes value cultural competence, equity awareness, and experience with diverse communities. Curriculum development concerns how leaders guide the selection, contextualization, and review of what is taught. Leadership training concerns sustained learning that helps leaders and educators recognize bias, communicate across difference, and translate equity principles into professional judgment. Leadership diversity

concerns meaningful representation in positions with decision-making authority. Together, these dimensions reflect the argument that equity requires repeated organizational practices rather than symbolic commitments. Radd et al. (2021) similarly frame equity-focused leadership as disciplined work involving inquiry, organizational learning, collaboration, and action.

DEIJB as Institutional Culture

DEIJB is most useful when understood as an institutional culture rather than a collection of celebratory activities. A diverse school may include many nationalities yet still concentrate authority, recognition, or curricular legitimacy within a narrow group. An inclusive school may invite participation but fail to address unequal access to influence. Justice adds a structural question: whether rules, practices, and outcomes systematically advantage some groups while marginalizing others. Belonging provides an experiential test of the system—whether staff and students can participate as valued members without having to minimize their cultural or linguistic identities.

Ferdman (2014) presents inclusion as a multilevel practice shaped by individuals, groups, leaders, and organizational systems. This perspective is important for international schools because staff diversity alone does not determine whether difference becomes educationally productive. Inclusive leadership creates conditions in which members experience both belonging and recognition for their distinct contributions (Randel et al., 2018). In education, that balance can influence whether teachers raise concerns, share culturally grounded knowledge, challenge biased routines, and adapt learning for students who are not well served by dominant assumptions.

The addition of justice and belonging also guards against superficial implementation. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) emphasize that equity work requires attention to power and patterned advantage, while Powell and Menendian (2016) distinguish belonging from forms of inclusion that leave the boundaries of membership unchanged. For Malaysian international schools, the practical issue is whether local and regional knowledge, multilingual identities, and varied family expectations have genuine institutional standing. DEIJB thus represents the environment that can convert leadership intentions into shared norms, decision rules, professional expectations, and classroom support.

Culturally Responsive Learning

Culturally responsive learning refers to learning environments in which students' cultural identities and experiences are deliberately connected to academic challenge, participation, and meaning. It does not reduce culture to festivals, food, or isolated examples. Gay (2018) describes culturally responsive teaching as the use of cultural knowledge and frames of reference to make learning more relevant and effective. Hammond (2015) adds that responsiveness should support cognitive rigor: trusting relationships, recognition of cultural patterns, and carefully designed scaffolding can strengthen students' capacity for independent learning.

The construct also has a critical and sustaining dimension. Ladson-Billings (2014) argues that culturally relevant pedagogy joins academic success with cultural competence and critical consciousness. Paris and Alim (2017) extend this position by emphasizing pedagogies that

sustain, rather than merely acknowledge, the cultural and linguistic practices of communities. In an international school, these principles call for more than inserting Malaysian examples into an imported syllabus. They require teachers and leaders to consider whose perspectives organize a topic, how multiple knowledge traditions can deepen inquiry, and whether classroom participation allows students to use their identities as intellectual resources.

Culturally responsive learning is therefore an outcome of interacting conditions. Teacher knowledge and judgment are crucial, but school structures influence access to relevant materials, time for collaborative planning, assessment flexibility, professional learning, and relationships with families and communities. This institutional dependence explains why leadership is theoretically important even when its effect on learning is indirect.

Leadership Practices and Culturally Responsive Learning

Recruitment can affect culturally responsive learning by determining which perspectives, competencies, and commitments enter positions of influence. Hiring criteria that reward experience across cultures, knowledge of local communities, and evidence of equitable practice can strengthen a school's capacity to support diverse learners. Yet recruitment is temporally distant from classroom practice. A newly appointed leader may possess the desired orientation but still encounter established routines, external curriculum requirements, or weak implementation systems. Recruitment is therefore a necessary capacity-building process whose educational effect may depend on the culture into which leaders are appointed.

Curriculum development provides a more obvious connection to learning because it determines content, resources, assessment, and the visibility of different knowledge traditions. However, international schools operate within programme specifications and accreditation expectations that can constrain local adaptation. Lee et al. (2012) show that international programme implementation involves negotiation among external requirements, leadership capacity, and school context. Curriculum leadership may support culturally responsive practice when leaders create room for contextualization, engage communities, and provide teachers with resources and autonomy. Formal curriculum revision alone, however, may remain detached from enacted pedagogy.

Leadership training can build the cultural knowledge, reflective capacity, and practical skills needed to recognize inequity and support responsive teaching. Training is most likely to matter when it is sustained, job-embedded, and linked to decisions that participants actually make. One-off workshops may increase awareness without changing staffing, supervision, curriculum review, or instructional support. Equity-focused professional learning must therefore be reinforced through expectations, coaching, collaboration, and accountability (Radd et al., 2021).

Leadership diversity may exert a more immediate effect because it changes who participates in interpretation and decision-making. Diverse leadership teams can widen the cultural knowledge available to the school, challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, and provide students and staff with visible evidence that authority is not limited to one national or cultural profile. Representation alone is insufficient; leaders must have meaningful influence. When diversity is connected to voice and authority, it can strengthen the relevance of school

decisions and the legitimacy of culturally responsive learning (Khalifa, 2018; Randel et al., 2018).

DEIJB as a Mediating Mechanism

The mediating argument follows from the distance between leadership action and classroom learning. Recruitment, training, and representation do not automatically change teaching. They first shape who is heard, which concerns are recognized, how resources are allocated, and whether staff feel able to question inequitable practice. These institutional conditions are captured by DEIJB. When leadership actions strengthen representation, fairness, participation, structural accountability, and belonging, teachers are more likely to receive both permission and support to enact culturally responsive learning.

This mechanism is consistent with multilevel accounts of inclusion. Ferdman (2014) argues that organizational systems influence whether inclusion is experienced in groups and daily work. Randel et al. (2018) likewise connect inclusive leader behaviour to experiences of belonging and valued uniqueness, which can support engagement and contribution. In schools, culturally responsive leadership operates through the development of teachers and organizational environments that affirm students and communities (Khalifa et al., 2016). DEIJB can therefore explain why similar leadership initiatives produce different learning outcomes across schools.

The mediation pathway may nevertheless differ by leadership dimension. Recruitment and training are likely to require an institutional culture that converts individual capability into common practice. Leadership diversity may affect learning both directly, by broadening decision-making, and indirectly, by strengthening belonging and inclusive norms. Curriculum development may be less dependent on this pathway if curriculum decisions are dominated by external frameworks, or it may require a more specific mechanism such as teacher agency, curriculum coherence, or implementation fidelity. Testing the four indirect paths separately allows these differences to be identified.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development

The conceptual framework positions equity-centered leadership as the independent variable, DEIJB as the mediating variable, and culturally responsive learning as the dependent variable. Equity-centered leadership is represented through leadership recruitment, curriculum development, leadership training, and leadership diversity. The model proposes that these practices may influence culturally responsive learning directly. It also proposes that leadership shapes the institutional conditions represented by DEIJB, which in turn provide an indirect route to culturally responsive learning.

The direct paths reflect the expectation that staffing, curriculum guidance, professional learning, and representation can shape the capacity and support available for responsive pedagogy. The mediating paths reflect the proposition that leadership becomes educationally consequential when it is embedded in school culture, participation, decision processes, and experiences of belonging. This model integrates the structural emphasis of transformative and equity-focused leadership with the classroom emphasis of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy (Khalifa, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017; Shields & Hesbol, 2020). The following hypotheses were tested:

- H1: Leadership recruitment has a significant relationship with culturally responsive learning.
H2: Curriculum development has a significant relationship with culturally responsive learning.
H3: Leadership training has a significant relationship with culturally responsive learning.
H4: Leadership diversity has a significant relationship with culturally responsive learning.
H5: Equity-centered leadership has a significant relationship with DEIJB.
H6: DEIJB mediates the relationship between leadership recruitment and culturally responsive learning.
H7: DEIJB mediates the relationship between curriculum development and culturally responsive learning.
H8: DEIJB mediates the relationship between leadership training and culturally responsive learning.
H9: DEIJB mediates the relationship between leadership diversity and culturally responsive learning.

Methodology

Research Design

A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was used to test the proposed relationships. This design was appropriate for estimating associations among latent constructs from standardized responses collected across a defined population at one period of time (Sekaran, 2003). The unit of analysis was the individual educator or school leadership professional working in a Malaysian international school.

Population and Sample

The target population comprised teachers and leadership personnel in Malaysian international schools, including principals, vice principals, administrators, and other staff with school leadership responsibilities. Purposive sampling was used because participants needed direct knowledge of school leadership practices, institutional culture, and teaching and learning. After screening, 390 valid responses formed the analytical sample. Teachers accounted for 196 responses (50.3%), while school leaders and administrators accounted for 194 (49.7%). This near-even distribution enabled the analysis to incorporate perspectives from classroom practice and organizational decision-making.

Research Instrument

Data were collected through a structured, self-administered questionnaire. The instrument contained demographic questions and multi-item measures for equity-centered leadership, DEIJB, and culturally responsive learning. Equity-centered leadership was operationalized through four dimensions: leadership recruitment, curriculum development, leadership training, and leadership diversity. Responses to construct items were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The items assessed respondents' perceptions of leadership practices, the institutional experience of equity and belonging, and the extent to which learning recognized and responded to students' cultural backgrounds.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Content validity was assessed before the main survey by a six-member panel comprising two academics, two policymakers, and two practitioners. The panel reviewed item relevance,

wording, clarity, and coverage, after which the questionnaire was revised. Internal consistency and convergent validity were assessed in the measurement model. Composite reliability values above .70 and average variance extracted values above .50 were treated as evidence of satisfactory reliability and convergent validity, respectively (Hair et al., 2021).

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed online through Google Forms to eligible participants in Malaysian international schools. Data collection took place from June 2024 to December 2024. The survey information explained the academic purpose of the study, and participants were informed that their responses would be treated confidentially. Follow-up contact with schools was used to improve participation. Because the thesis contained conflicting preliminary counts, the article reports only the final screened dataset of 390 valid cases used in the demographic and construct analyses.

Data Analysis

The data were screened and summarized using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Statistics, Version 27. Descriptive statistics were used to report respondent characteristics. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was conducted in SmartPLS 4 to assess the measurement and structural models. The measurement model was evaluated using composite reliability and average variance extracted. Bootstrapped t statistics and p values were used to test the direct and indirect relationships. PLS-SEM was suitable because the model included multiple latent constructs, four leadership dimensions, and mediation paths, and because the analysis aimed to estimate both measurement quality and predictive structural relationships (Hair et al., 2021). Statistical significance was evaluated at $p < .05$.

Findings

The findings are reported in four stages: respondent characteristics, measurement quality, direct relationships, and mediation. The final analysis included 390 valid responses.

Respondents' Profile

Table 1 presents the respondents' roles, ages, and professional experience. The sample was balanced between teachers and school leaders or administrators. Age and experience were also distributed across categories, reducing the likelihood that the results reflect only one career stage.

Table 1

Respondents' Profile

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Role	Teacher	196	50.3
	School leader/administrator	194	49.7
	Total	390	100.0
Age	21–30 years	98	25.1
	31–40 years	90	23.1

Characteristic	Category	n	%
	41–50 years	103	26.4
	51 years and above	99	25.4
	Total	390	100.0
Experience	1–5 years	116	29.7
	6–10 years	92	23.6
	11–15 years	83	21.3
	16 years and above	99	25.4
	Total	390	100.0

Note. n = 390. Percentages may reflect rounding.

Measurement Model

The measurement model results are shown in Table 2. Composite reliability values ranged from .780 to .975, exceeding the recommended .70 threshold. Average variance extracted values ranged from .561 to .851 and were therefore above .50 for every construct. These results indicate satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 2

Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted
Culturally Responsive Learning	.975	.851
DEIJB	.896	.563
Leadership Curriculum	.931	.819
Leadership Diversity	.874	.699
Leadership Recruitment	.936	.787
Leadership Training	.780	.561

Note. DEIJB = Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Justice, and Belonging. Values above .70 for composite reliability and .50 for average variance extracted indicate satisfactory measurement quality.

Direct Relationships

Table 3 reports the direct relationship tests. Leadership recruitment (H1), curriculum development (H2), and leadership training (H3) did not have statistically significant direct relationships with culturally responsive learning. H3 is explicitly treated as not supported because its p value was .620. Leadership diversity had a significant direct relationship with culturally responsive learning (H4; $t = 2.171$, $p = .030$). Equity-centered leadership also had a strong significant relationship with DEIJB (H5; $t = 20.160$, $p < .001$). These results suggest that representation in leadership is the dimension most immediately connected to culturally

responsive learning, while the broader leadership approach is strongly connected to institutional culture.

Table 3

Direct Relationship Results

Hypothesis	Relationship	t	p	Decision
H1	Leadership recruitment → Culturally responsive learning	1.155	.248	Not supported
H2	Curriculum development → Culturally responsive learning	1.244	.214	Not supported
H3	Leadership training → Culturally responsive learning	0.496	.620	Not supported
H4	Leadership diversity → Culturally responsive learning	2.171	.030	Supported
H5	Equity-centered leadership → DEIJB	20.160	< .001	Supported

Note. A hypothesis was supported when $p < .05$. H3 is correctly classified as not supported because $p = .620$.

Mediating Effect of DEIJB

The indirect effects are reported in Table 4. DEIJB significantly mediated the relationships between leadership recruitment and culturally responsive learning (H6; $t = 3.195$, $p = .001$), leadership training and culturally responsive learning (H8; $t = 3.726$, $p < .001$), and leadership diversity and culturally responsive learning (H9; $t = 2.091$, $p = .037$). The indirect effect of curriculum development was not significant (H7; $t = 0.293$, $p = .770$). Recruitment and training therefore became consequential through the institutional pathway, while leadership diversity demonstrated both a direct relationship and a significant indirect relationship through DEIJB.

Table 4

Mediating Effect of DEIJB

Hypothesis	Indirect relationship	t	p	Decision
H6	Leadership recruitment → DEIJB → Culturally responsive learning	3.195	.001	Supported
H7	Curriculum development → DEIJB → Culturally responsive learning	0.293	.770	Not supported
H8	Leadership training → DEIJB → Culturally responsive learning	3.726	< .001	Supported
H9	Leadership diversity → DEIJB → Culturally responsive learning	2.091	.037	Supported

Note. DEIJB = Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Justice, and Belonging. Indirect effects were evaluated at $p < .05$.

Summary of Hypotheses

Table 5 consolidates the corrected hypothesis decisions. Five hypotheses—H4, H5, H6, H8, and H9—were supported, while H1, H2, H3, and H7 were not supported. The pattern positions DEIJB as a central institutional pathway rather than an ancillary programme: leadership practices appear to support culturally responsive learning when they shape the culture, norms, and relationships through which equitable practice is enacted.

Table 5

Summary of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Statement	Decision
H1	Leadership recruitment has a significant relationship with culturally responsive learning.	Not supported
H2	Curriculum development has a significant relationship with culturally responsive learning.	Not supported
H3	Leadership training has a significant relationship with culturally responsive learning.	Not supported
H4	Leadership diversity has a significant relationship with culturally responsive learning.	Supported
H5	Equity-centered leadership has a significant relationship with DEIJB.	Supported
H6	DEIJB mediates the relationship between leadership recruitment and culturally responsive learning.	Supported
H7	DEIJB mediates the relationship between curriculum development and culturally responsive learning.	Not supported
H8	DEIJB mediates the relationship between leadership training and culturally responsive learning.	Supported
H9	DEIJB mediates the relationship between leadership diversity and culturally responsive learning.	Supported

Note. Five hypotheses were supported and four were not supported.

Discussion

The results show that equity-centered leadership does not influence culturally responsive learning through a single uniform route. Only leadership diversity had a significant direct relationship with the learning outcome, whereas recruitment and training operated indirectly through DEIJB. Curriculum development was significant through neither route. This differentiated pattern is more informative than a general claim that leadership matters. It identifies the institutional conditions under which leadership practices are likely to reach teaching and learning in Malaysian international schools.

The non-significant direct effect of leadership recruitment can be explained by the distance between selection and classroom practice. Recruitment determines who enters leadership, but appointment criteria do not guarantee that new leaders will have authority, resources, or organizational support to change teaching. In international schools, recruitment may also

prioritize qualifications, curriculum experience, mobility, and reputation. Cultural competence may be valued rhetorically without being integrated into performance expectations or instructional systems. Khalifa (2018) emphasizes that culturally responsive leadership requires ongoing community responsiveness and institutional reform; it cannot be reduced to the personal orientation of individual appointees. The significant mediated path supports this interpretation. Recruitment mattered when it contributed to a school culture in which difference, fairness, participation, justice, and belonging were institutionally reinforced.

Curriculum development did not show either a significant direct effect or a significant indirect effect through DEIJB. One likely explanation lies in the governance of international curricula. Schools may follow externally specified learning outcomes, assessment regimes, textbooks, accreditation processes, and professional standards. Leaders can revise curriculum documents, but the degree of local discretion may vary substantially across programmes and schools. Lee et al. (2012) demonstrate that international programme implementation creates leadership challenges involving programme requirements, teacher capacity, and organizational context. A formal commitment to multicultural content may consequently remain weakly connected to the enacted curriculum. The null mediation result further suggests that the effect of curriculum development may depend on mechanisms more specific than institutional inclusion, such as teacher agency, curriculum coherence, assessment flexibility, subject-level planning, or fidelity of implementation.

Leadership training was not directly related to culturally responsive learning, but its indirect effect through DEIJB was significant. This result distinguishes exposure to professional learning from organizational application. Training may improve language, awareness, and confidence without changing pedagogy when it is brief, generic, or separated from supervision and decision-making. Equity-focused leadership development becomes more influential when schools translate it into shared expectations, reflective routines, coaching, and accountability. Radd et al. (2021) argue for sustained equity-focused practices rather than isolated initiatives, and Shields and Hesbol (2020) similarly locate transformative leadership in the disruption of inequitable assumptions and systems. In the current setting, DEIJB appears to provide the collective environment that enables training to move from individual learning to institutional and classroom practice.

Leadership diversity was the only dimension with a significant direct relationship with culturally responsive learning. Diverse leadership can broaden the knowledge represented in school decisions, improve recognition of culturally specific concerns, and challenge the assumption that international quality must be associated with one dominant cultural model. It may also strengthen trust among staff and students who see that multiple identities can hold legitimate authority. This finding is consistent with culturally responsive leadership, which values community knowledge and the reform of organizational structures (Khalifa et al., 2016). It also aligns with inclusive leadership research showing that belonging and being valued for uniqueness support fuller contribution (Randel et al., 2018). The significant mediated effect indicates, however, that representation is strongest when diverse leaders have genuine influence over institutional norms and practice. Symbolic diversity without authority would be unlikely to produce the same result.

The strong relationship between equity-centered leadership and DEIJB confirms that leadership is central to institutional culture. Leaders influence recruitment criteria, promotion, curriculum priorities, professional learning, communication, participation, resource allocation, and responses to inequity. These decisions establish which differences are recognized and whether staff can raise concerns without marginalization. Ferdman's (2014) systemic account of inclusion helps explain the magnitude of this relationship: inclusion is produced through aligned practices across organizational levels. Powell and Menendian (2016) similarly show that belonging depends on how boundaries of membership are constructed. Within Malaysian international schools, equity-centered leadership can connect global school missions with the cultural realities of local and transnational communities by making membership, voice, and recognition operational rather than ceremonial.

The mediation findings provide the article's principal contribution. DEIJB mediated recruitment, training, and diversity, indicating that these leadership practices reach culturally responsive learning through a shared institutional pathway. Recruitment supplies people and commitments; training develops capacity; leadership diversity broadens representation and perspective. DEIJB converts these inputs into norms of participation, fairness, accountability, and belonging that can support responsive pedagogy. Gay (2018) and Hammond (2015) show that culturally responsive practice depends on relationships, expectations, knowledge, and meaningful connection. The present findings extend that classroom insight by showing that such conditions are partly organizational achievements.

The absence of curriculum mediation should not be read as evidence that curriculum is unimportant. Rather, it indicates that curriculum leadership may not influence learning simply because the school has a stronger DEIJB culture. Culturally sustaining pedagogy requires attention to how content, language, assessment, and classroom authority are enacted (Paris & Alim, 2017). International schools may therefore need curriculum-specific processes alongside their institutional equity framework: local curriculum audits, participation by Malaysian and regional stakeholders, protected time for contextual adaptation, subject-level coaching, and review of assessment effects. The overall pattern supports a context-sensitive model in which leadership influence is distributed across organizational culture and pedagogical implementation rather than assumed to be direct.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined how four dimensions of equity-centered leadership relate to culturally responsive learning and whether DEIJB mediates those relationships in Malaysian international schools. The corrected results support five of nine hypotheses. Leadership diversity had a significant direct relationship with culturally responsive learning, and equity-centered leadership strongly predicted DEIJB. DEIJB mediated the effects of leadership recruitment, leadership training, and leadership diversity, but not curriculum development. The central conclusion is that DEIJB is a pathway through which leadership capacity becomes culturally responsive institutional practice.

International schools should make this pathway explicit. Recruitment frameworks should evaluate cultural competence, equity awareness, experience with multilingual communities, and evidence that candidates can respond to bias and unequal participation. These criteria

should be built into structured interviews, reference checks, onboarding, and performance review rather than treated as optional personal qualities. Leadership development should be sustained and practice-based, with attention to culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive communication, anti-bias awareness, conflict across cultural difference, and justice-oriented decision-making.

Leadership diversity should be meaningful rather than symbolic. Schools should widen recruitment and promotion pipelines, examine patterns in who gains decision authority, and ensure that local, regional, and underrepresented leaders participate in consequential decisions. Mentoring and succession planning can support representation, but diverse leaders must also have access to information, resources, and influence. Schools should monitor belonging, voice, and perceptions of fairness among staff and students to determine whether representation is changing institutional experience.

Curriculum development requires a complementary strategy. Schools should preserve the academic standards and portability of international programmes while creating structured opportunities to incorporate Malaysian and regional histories, knowledge, languages, and community perspectives. Curriculum audits should examine representation, assessment, resource selection, and opportunities for students to connect learning with their identities. Policymakers and accreditation bodies can support this work by articulating clearer DEIJB expectations, requiring evidence of culturally responsive implementation, and recognizing locally grounded adaptation as a dimension of quality rather than a departure from international standards.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical Implications

The article contributes theoretically by positioning DEIJB as a mediating mechanism rather than a parallel set of organizational values. This move clarifies how equity-centered leadership can influence culturally responsive learning even when several leadership dimensions have no significant direct effect. It also connects two bodies of scholarship that often operate at different levels: leadership research concerned with organizational structures and culturally responsive pedagogy concerned with classroom relationships and learning. The findings suggest that institutional culture is a meso-level bridge between them. The differentiated paths also refine the concept of equity-centered leadership. Recruitment, curriculum development, training, and diversity should not be assumed to function identically. Recruitment and training were consequential through DEIJB, diversity operated directly and indirectly, and curriculum development did not operate through either tested route. The model therefore expands culturally responsive learning from an individual teacher competency to an institutional outcome shaped by leadership, culture, and implementation conditions.

Practical Implications

For practice, the findings offer school boards, principals, human resource teams, curriculum leaders, and accreditation bodies a more precise basis for intervention. Schools can align recruitment criteria with cultural competence, connect leadership training to school routines, and assess whether diverse leadership has genuine decision authority. DEIJB indicators should be incorporated into strategic planning, staff development, school climate review, and

leadership evaluation. Useful evidence may include disaggregated recruitment and promotion data, staff and student belonging measures, participation in decision-making, responses to reported bias, and the representation of local perspectives in curriculum and school communication.

The results also caution against relying on policy statements or one-off workshops. Culturally responsive learning is more likely when leadership intentions are reinforced by time, resources, coaching, collaborative inquiry, and accountability. International schools can establish cross-cultural curriculum teams, include students and families in review processes, and use classroom evidence to evaluate whether institutional commitments are reaching learners. This approach turns DEIJB from a public message into an operational system.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations define the interpretation of the results. First, the study focused on Malaysian international schools, with substantial participation from schools in Kuala Lumpur, and the findings may not generalize to international schools in other national or regulatory settings. Second, the cross-sectional survey captured perceptions at one period of time. Self-reported responses may not fully represent classroom interaction, informal leadership, or the quality of implementation. Observation, document analysis, and interviews could reveal differences between stated policy and lived practice.

Third, DEIJB was modeled as one combined construct. This approach captured the institutional framework as a whole but may conceal different effects of diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and belonging. Future studies should test these dimensions separately and examine whether, for example, belonging or justice provides the strongest link to culturally responsive learning. Longitudinal designs could also assess whether changes in recruitment, training, or representation precede changes in institutional culture and pedagogy.

Fourth, the sample focused mainly on teachers and school leaders. Future research should include students, parents, curriculum coordinators, policymakers, governing boards, and accreditation personnel. Mixed-methods research would be particularly valuable for explaining why curriculum development did not produce a significant direct or mediated effect. Comparative studies could also examine whether the pathways differ among British, American, Australian, Cambridge, and International Baccalaureate curriculum systems, as well as across primary, secondary, and combined schools.

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