



**Leading with Inclusion: Managerial Practices of School Heads in Culturally and Ethnically Diverse Schools in Tacurong City**

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Date Submitted: March 06, 2026
Date Accepted: March 07, 2026
Date Reviewed: March 20, 2026
Date Revised: April 25, 2026
Date Published: May 12, 2026

How to cite this work:

Ochinang, J., & Ngag, J. B. J. (2026). Leading with Inclusion: Managerial Practices of School Heads in Culturally and Ethnically Diverse Schools in Tacurong City. *MÈTILÈDTÈD: International Multidisciplinary Journal in Language, Education, and Culture*, 2(1), 316–328. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20133880>

**ABSTRACT**

In an increasingly multicultural society, schools serve as critical spaces for promoting inclusion, equity, and mutual understanding among learners from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This study explored the managerial practices of school heads in culturally and ethnically diverse elementary schools in Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat, with particular attention to how leadership practices foster inclusive and equitable school environments. Anchored in a qualitative research design, the study employed a phenomenological approach to capture and describe the lived experiences of school heads managing multicultural school communities during the school year 2025–2026. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions and were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and leadership practices related to inclusion and cultural responsiveness. The findings revealed that school heads perceived cultural and ethnic diversity as an inherent and daily dimension of school management rather than a peripheral challenge. Effective leadership was characterized by inclusive and participatory decision-making, respect for religious and cultural beliefs, culturally sensitive communication, fairness, and strong collaboration with parents, elders, and community

stakeholders. School heads demonstrated adaptive leadership by contextualizing national education policies, institutionalizing culturally responsive programs such as IPED and ALIVE, and promoting cultural celebrations that fostered learner identity, belongingness, and pride. Inclusion and equity were conceptualized as learner-centered and values-driven practices that addressed individual needs while ensuring equal opportunities for all. Despite constraints related to resources and context, school heads exhibited personal and professional growth, cultivating empathy, cultural competence, and reflective leadership capacities. The study concluded that inclusive school leaders' contexts extend beyond policy compliance and administrative efficiency. It requires sustained empathy, cultural intelligence, adaptability, and collaborative engagement with stakeholders.

**Keywords:** *inclusive leadership, culturally responsive management, school heads, multicultural schools, Tacurong City*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Background of the Study**

In an increasingly multicultural society, schools have become vital spaces for fostering inclusion, understanding, and equity among learners from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Classrooms are often composed of students from various ethnolinguistic groups including Maguindanaon, Ilonggo, Cebuano, Ilocano, and other Indigenous Peoples (IPs). This cultural heterogeneity presents both opportunities and challenges for school leaders, who must not only deliver quality education but also ensure that school environments are safe, inclusive, and respectful of diversity.

Globally, educational leaders face the growing challenge of managing increasingly diverse school populations characterized by varied cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Inclusive leadership that fosters equity and respects cultural identities is essential for improving school climate and student outcomes, as highlighted by studies across Europe, North America, and Asia (Day & Sammons, 2018; Lumby, 2020).

In the Philippines, the Department of Education's emphasis on inclusive education aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), yet research shows limited focus on how school heads operationalize inclusive management practices in culturally diverse settings (Garcia & Reyes, 2019; Delos Santos, 2021).

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This study aims to investigate the managerial strategies employed by school heads in Tacurong City to foster inclusive school environments that honor cultural diversity and promote educational excellence.

## **Research Questions**

This study sought to examine the managerial strategies employed by school heads in multicultural elementary schools of Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026, focusing on how these strategies foster inclusive school environments that honor cultural and ethnic diversity while promoting educational excellence.

Specifically, this sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of school heads in managing culturally and ethnically diverse school communities in Tacurong City?
2. How do cultural and ethnic diversity influence school heads' leadership and decision-making practices?
3. What meanings do school heads assign to inclusion and equity in the context of leading diverse school environments?
4. How do school heads navigate challenges and opportunities in promoting inclusive practices among students, teachers, and stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to explore and describe the managerial strategies employed by school heads in multicultural elementary schools of Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026. Phenomenology is appropriate for this study because it focuses on understanding the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings they attach to those experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). By using this approach, the study aims to uncover how school heads navigate cultural and ethnic diversity and implement inclusive strategies that foster equitable and supportive learning environments. Phenomenology allows researchers to capture rich, in-depth narratives, providing insight into the complexities of leading multicultural schools while promoting educational excellence (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).

### **Respondents of the Study**

The participants will consist of 15 carefully selected school heads from the City Schools Division of Tacurong City for the school year 2025–2026, who meet the inclusion criteria set by the researcher.

A purposive sampling method will be employed to ensure that participants have direct experience in managing multicultural school environments, which is essential for generating

relevant and rich data (Palinkas et al., 2015; Creswell, 2013). The sample size of 15 aligns with recommendations for phenomenological studies, where smaller, focused samples allow for in-depth exploration of participants’ lived experiences and help achieve data saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Doyle et al., 2020).

**Table 1.** Participants’ Inclusion Criteria

<b>Qualifications</b>
<i>Participants: 15 School Heads</i>
<p><b>1. Position and Role</b> – Participants must be officially designated as school heads (principals or head teachers) in elementary schools within Tacurong City, holding managerial and supervisory responsibilities over school operations during the school year 2025–2026.</p> <p><b>2. Experience in Multicultural Settings</b> – Participants must have at least two years of experience managing culturally and ethnically diverse classrooms or school communities to ensure familiarity with inclusive leadership practices.</p> <p><b>3. Engagement in Inclusive Practices</b> – Participants must have actively implemented or overseen strategies, programs, or policies aimed at fostering inclusion, equity, and collaboration among students, teachers, and other stakeholders.</p> <p><b>4. Willingness to Participate</b> – Participants must voluntarily agree to take part in the study and be willing to provide detailed narratives about their lived experiences, challenges, and managerial strategies in leading multicultural schools.</p>

### Sampling Technique

During the conduct of this study, a Purposive Sampling Technique will be intentionally utilized to carefully select fifteen **15 school heads** from the City Schools Division of Tacurong City, for school year 2025-2026, who meet the specific inclusion criteria established by the researcher.

Purposive sampling, alternately referred to as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, constitutes a variant of non-probability sampling. Within this approach, researchers exercise their own judgment and discretionary acumen in the selection of individuals from the population to partake in their survey endeavors (Alchamer, 2021). This method of sampling mandates that researchers possess prior knowledge of the objectives underpinning their study so as to effectively pinpoint and make contact with eligible participants through online survey platforms like Alchamer. Researchers resort to purposive sampling in order to secure access to a distinct subgroup of individuals, whereby all survey respondents are meticulously chosen based on their alignment with a specific demographic or criterion.

### Research Instruments

In this study, a semi-structured interview will function as an exploratory instrument during both in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to explore and describe the managerial strategies employed by school heads in multicultural elementary schools of Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026, focusing on how these strategies foster

inclusive school environments that honor cultural and ethnic diversity while promoting educational excellence.

The validity and appropriateness of this tool will be substantiated through a rigorous evaluation process conducted by a panel of experts who possess expertise in the development of relevant research instruments.

### **Data Transcription Process**

All gathered raw data from the participants through interviews and FGDs were transcribed using the transcription process as described by Flick (2014), Ngag (2023), and Braun (2009), involves the systematic categorization of textual components, including statements, phrases, and words, into organized groupings or categories. These categories will be either derived from established frameworks or custom-developed to align with the study's specific objectives.

This rigorous transcription process ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative data, which served as the foundation for the subsequent narrative analysis and the meaningful interpretation of the gathered raw data.

These categories were either drawn from established frameworks or custom-crafted to align with the study's objectives. To execute this analytical process, a series of vital steps were meticulously followed:

**Step 1: Data Organization and Preparation.** Initially, all data sources, such as interview transcripts, notes from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and relevant documents, will be meticulously organized and prepared for analysis. This phase ensures the systematic arrangement and accessibility of the data.

**Step 2: Data Immersion.** Subsequently, the researcher will deeply engage with the data by conducting a thorough review of interview transcripts and FGD notes. This immersive process aids in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the content and context embedded within the collected information.

**Step 3: Systematic Coding Process.** The third step involves initiating a systematic coding process. Initial codes will be generated by identifying meaningful segments or patterns within the data. These codes will capture essential concepts, ideas, or themes related to the narratives of the teachers with regard to their professional development and its outcomes in their teaching effectiveness.

**Step 4: Clustering and Preliminary Themes.** Following coding, the identified codes will be grouped into preliminary themes based on shared meaning or relevance. This step aims to establish an initial structure for organizing the data.

**Step 5: Theme Scrutiny and Refinement.** Next, the emerging themes and their corresponding codes will undergo a process of review and refinement. Researchers will ensure the consistency and clarity of these themes, making necessary adjustments. Each refined theme

will be assigned a descriptive name that succinctly represents the content it encapsulates, facilitating easy identification and interpretation.

Step 6: Linking Data Excerpts. Relevant data excerpts, such as quotes or segments extracted from interviews and FGDs, will be selected and associated with the respective themes. These excerpts will serve as supporting evidence for the identified themes.

Step 7: Thematic Analysis. Finally, the thematic analysis will extend beyond surface-level identification. Researchers will interpret the meaning and implications of each theme within the context of the study's objectives. They will seek patterns, connections, and variations within the themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of narratives of the teachers.

This meticulous and structured process of thematic analysis will enable researchers to systematically explore and comprehend the managerial strategies employed by school heads in multicultural elementary schools of Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026, focusing on how these strategies foster inclusive school environments that honor cultural and ethnic diversity while promoting educational excellence.

### **Data Analysis**

In this study centered on uncovering the managerial strategies employed by school heads in multicultural elementary schools of Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026, focusing on how these strategies foster inclusive school environments that honor cultural and ethnic diversity while promoting educational excellence, a content or thematic analysis approach will be employed to examine the collected data. This methodology, as described by Flick (2014), Ngag (2023), and Braun (2009), involves the systematic categorization of textual components, including statements, phrases, and words, into organized groupings or categories. These categories will be either derived from established frameworks or custom-developed to align with the study's specific objectives.

### **Scope and Limitations**

This study focuses on exploring the managerial practices of school heads in culturally and ethnically diverse schools, specifically within the City Schools Division of Tacurong, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026. The respondents of the study will be school heads who are directly engaged in managing schools with diverse student populations, providing insights into how they foster inclusion, address cultural differences, and promote equity in their leadership roles. The study is delimited to selected schools in Tacurong City to capture the unique context of diversity within this locale, and it will not cover schools outside the division.

Employing a qualitative research design, particularly a phenomenological approach, the study will gather rich descriptions of lived experiences through in-depth interviews, focusing on the challenges, strategies, and inclusive practices school heads adopt. This scope ensures a deeper understanding of why and how inclusive managerial practices are significant in creating supportive and equitable learning environments within multicultural educational settings.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

In an increasingly multicultural society, schools have become vital spaces for fostering inclusion, understanding, and equity among learners from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to explore and describe the managerial strategies employed by school heads in multicultural elementary schools of Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026.

The findings of the study reveal that school heads in Tacurong City experience cultural and ethnic diversity as an integral and daily aspect of school management rather than as an isolated challenge. The results show that effective school leadership in culturally diverse communities is characterized by inclusive practices, respect for religious and cultural beliefs, culturally sensitive communication, fairness in decision-making, strong community and stakeholder engagement, leadership adaptability, and the promotion of cultural identity and pride.

School heads actively accommodate diverse religious practices, adjust communication strategies to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers, and model fairness and equality to foster unity and trust within the school community. Moreover, collaboration with parents, elders, and community stakeholders emerged as a vital strategy in strengthening culturally responsive management, while adaptive leadership enabled school heads to mediate cultural differences and align school policies with community values. Overall, the results highlight that culturally responsive school management contributes to harmonious school environments and supports inclusive and equitable educational experiences for all learners.

Further, the study revealed that school heads in Tacurong City actively integrate culturally responsive and inclusive practices into their leadership and decision-making, ensuring sensitivity to traditions, taboos, and diverse cultural identities. Leadership was characterized by participatory and consultative decision-making, engaging stakeholders from various ethnic groups to enhance legitimacy and cultural relevance. Administrators demonstrated policy adaptation and context-sensitive leadership, tailoring DepEd guidelines to meet the specific needs of culturally diverse learners. They also institutionalized support structures, including IPED and ALIVE programs, to affirm cultural heritage, and used cultural celebrations to promote visibility, pride, and identity.

Furthermore, leaders emphasized belongingness and anti-discrimination, creating inclusive environments where diversity is embraced, while also engaging in adaptive leadership and professional growth to develop cultural competence and effectively respond to complex community contexts. These findings collectively highlight a multidimensional approach to leadership in culturally diverse schools, blending inclusivity, community engagement, adaptive strategies, and capacity building.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that school heads in Tacurong City conceptualize inclusion and equity as learner-centered, culturally responsive, and participatory practices. Inclusion is understood as ensuring equal opportunity and fostering belongingness for all learners, while equity involves addressing individual needs to provide fair and differentiated support. Leaders actively recognize and celebrate cultural diversity, embedding it into school programs and daily practices. Inclusive leadership is characterized by shared responsibility, collaboration with teachers, parents, and community stakeholders, and the implementation of targeted support systems and programs that address both academic and socio-emotional needs. Values-driven

leadership, emphasizing empathy, fairness, and respect, underpins these practices, while systematic evaluation and monitoring of inclusion initiatives ensure effectiveness and accountability.

Finally, the study revealed that school heads in Tacurong City employ a multifaceted approach to promote inclusive practices in culturally diverse and remote school settings. Key strategies include recognizing and affirming learners' cultural identities to overcome stigma, addressing language and communication barriers, engaging stakeholders through collaborative decision-making, and applying adaptive leadership to manage resistance and conflict. Inclusive programs such as IPED, ALIVE, and cultural celebrations were critical in fostering equity, belongingness, and learner engagement. While resource constraints posed challenges, external support and institutional backing enabled the implementation of these initiatives. Additionally, school heads demonstrated personal growth and transformative learning, cultivating empathy, reflection, and adaptive leadership capacities in navigating complex cultural and organizational contexts.

## **Conclusion**

The following inferences were made in light of this study's findings:

Leading culturally diverse schools requires more than administrative competence; it demands empathy, flexibility, and deep respect for cultural identities. The experiences of school heads illustrate that culturally responsive leadership is a continuous process of learning, adaptation, and collaboration, especially in multicultural contexts like Tacurong City.

Effective school leadership in culturally diverse settings extends beyond policy compliance; it requires empathy, cultural intelligence, and collaborative engagement.

Leaders who embrace diversity, adapt to local contexts, and actively foster equity not only enhance school management outcomes but also strengthen learner identity, community trust, and social cohesion.

Effective inclusive school management extends beyond policy compliance, requiring leaders to integrate cultural awareness, empathetic values, collaborative practices, and evidence-informed strategies. Reflecting on these findings, it becomes evident that inclusion and equity are not merely procedural goals but dynamic, lived practices that demand continuous adaptation, moral commitment, and active engagement with all stakeholders to ensure meaningful educational opportunities for every learner.

Inclusive school leadership in remote, culturally diverse communities requires a balance of empathy, decisiveness, and collaborative engagement. By integrating culturally responsive programs, fostering stakeholder participation, and reflecting on their leadership practices, school heads not only enhance equity and inclusion but also strengthen their professional effectiveness and resilience in managing complex educational environments.

## **Recommendations**

In the light of the findings, the following were recommended.

**Volume 1. Issue 1. MĒTILĒDTĒD:** *Multidisciplinary Journal in Language, Education, and Culture*

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1. Department of Education (DepEd) may establish a differentiated school leadership support framework for remote and culturally diverse schools by providing context-sensitive mentoring, monitoring, and capacity-building programs for school heads.
2. DepEd may deploy trained instructional leaders and supervisors who are knowledgeable in culturally responsive leadership and indigenous education to guide school managers in areas like Tacurong.
2. School Heads / Administrators may institutionalize culturally responsive leadership training by integrating regular professional development programs that focus on intercultural communication, indigenous knowledge systems, and inclusive decision-making. This will equip school leaders in remote and culturally diverse communities to manage schools more effectively while respecting local values, traditions, and identities, thereby strengthening trust and collaboration among stakeholders.
3. Teachers are encouraged to have active participation in shared governance and culturally grounded school initiatives by involving them in planning, policy discussions, and community engagement activities.
4. Policymakers and Educational Authorities (DepEd and LGUs) may develop localized school management policies for culturally diverse and remote contexts, rather than applying uniform administrative frameworks. Tailoring policies to the realities of areas like Tacurong City—such as geographic isolation, cultural diversity, and limited resources—can improve school effectiveness and support equitable education delivery in line with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).
5. Community–school partnerships by formalizing the involvement of elders, parents, and cultural leaders in school management processes. Their participation can provide culturally grounded insights, promote mutual respect, and help schools design programs that are culturally relevant, sustainable, and supported by the local community.
6. Future Researchers may conduct longitudinal and mixed-methods studies on culturally responsive school leadership in remote and indigenous contexts to examine how inclusive management practices evolve over time and influence learner outcomes, teacher retention, and community trust. Future research may also explore underrepresented perspectives—such as those of learners, parents, and indigenous elders—to deepen understanding of how school leadership shapes culturally sustaining education

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

In preparation for the conduct of this study, all the aforementioned plans and recommendations will be presented to East-West Mindanao Colleges Inc to ensure compliance with prescribed procedures and protocols. Within the context of the research focused on examining the managerial strategies employed by school heads in multicultural elementary schools of Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026, focusing on how these strategies foster inclusive school environments that honor cultural and ethnic diversity while promoting educational excellence, it is imperative to emphasize the paramount importance of

ethical considerations. Prior to commencing this study, the following ethical principles will be highlighted:

**Informed Consent:** Before participation, explicit and informed consent will be diligently obtained from all school heads involved in the study. It is imperative that they possess a comprehensive understanding of the study's objectives, methodologies, potential risks, and benefits.

Furthermore, participation will remain entirely voluntary, affording participants the autonomy to withdraw from the study at any juncture without encountering any adverse consequences.

**Anonymity and Confidentiality:** To safeguard the identities and responses of the teachers, rigorous measures will be enacted to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Rather than using actual names, pseudonyms or codes will be employed, upholding the privacy of the participants. The collected data will be securely stored with access restricted solely to the research team.

**Avoiding Harm:** Delicate subjects, such as the challenges inherent in their roles, will be discussed with meticulous consideration for the potential emotional and psychological impact on the participants. Strategies will be in place to minimize distress, and a support system will be readily available to assist participants should the need arise.

**Researcher-Participant Relationship:** The researcher will maintain a professional and respectful rapport when engaging with the school heads. Any actions that may exploit or cause harm to the participants will be scrupulously avoided, ensuring their utmost dignity and respect throughout the research process.

**Data Protection:** Adherence to data protection regulations and laws will be unwaveringly followed to safeguard the personal information of the participants. Stringent measures will be employed to ensure the secure storage and transmission of data.

**Voluntary Participation:** Participants will be assured that their involvement in the study is wholly voluntary, devoid of any form of coercion or external pressure.

**Researcher Bias:** The researcher will remain vigilant regarding potential biases that might influence data collection and analysis, upholding objectivity and transparency throughout the research endeavor.

**Institutional Approval:** Before initiating the study, the researcher will diligently seek ethical clearance from the pertinent institutional review boards or ethics committees.

**Honesty and Integrity:** The research findings will be reported truthfully and accurately, devoid of any manipulation or distortion to align with preconceived notions or biases.

**Beneficence:** The potential benefits of the research to educational practices and policies will be thoughtfully considered, ensuring that the study positively contributes to the enhancement of the education system.

**Cultural Sensitivity:**The researcher will display cultural sensitivity by respecting local customs, beliefs, and practices within the research setting, refraining from imposing external values on the participants.

**Inclusion and Diversity:**The study's structure will prioritize inclusivity and diversity, encompassing a wide spectrum of the managerial strategies employed by school heads in multicultural elementary schools of Tacurong City, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026, focusing on how these strategies foster inclusive school environments that honor cultural and ethnic diversity while promoting educational excellence.

## **Acknowledgment**

The researcher wishes to express his profound gratitude to all who played a role in bringing this study to fruition. With sincere appreciation and the highest regard, he takes this opportunity to recognize the invaluable contributions of the following individuals:

**PATRICEA I. SANDIGAN, MAED**, President of East-West Mindanao Colleges, Inc., for her visionary leadership and steadfast commitment to the growth and well-being of the institution's staff and students.

**EMILIA M. LOTILLA, PhD.**, Dean of the Graduate School Department, for her steadfast support, thoughtful encouragement, and nurturing guidance that proved invaluable throughout the entire conduct of this study.

**GILDO G. MOSQUEDA, CESO VI**, Schools Division Superintendent of Tacurong City, for graciously granting permission to conduct this study within the Division and for the continued encouragement and support extended throughout the pursuit of this endeavor.

**MELANIE DELOS SANTOS**, Cluster Head of North Cluster Tacurong, for granting permission to conduct the study in the district, and for all the love, support, advice, and for always encouraging the researcher to expand his horizons.

**JULIET P. TAMBUNGALAN, MAED**, Program Chairperson of the Graduate School, whose nurturing presence, generous support, and heartfelt encouragement provided the researcher with the strength and confidence needed throughout the preparation of this manuscript.

**JAIME BOY U. NGAG, JR., PhD**, The research adviser, for his steadfast support, thoughtful guidance, and invaluable assistance in the completion of this study.

**AMILUDEN G. MASABPI, PhD**, and **LEODIE D. MONES, PhD**, panel members, for their invaluable time, insightful remarks, and constructive suggestions.

**PARTICIPANTS**, for active participation during the conduct of the study.

His parents, **MR. HELOPILTO OCHINANG** and **MRS. EMILIE A. OCHINANG** for love and moral support.

To his wife, **GENGELYN D. OCHINANG**, and their three lovely children, **Firstea Vyen, Aica Dwayne, and Kaye Threenah**, for their unending love and support, which inspired him to pursue his master's degree.

Above all, to **ALMIGHTY GOD** for life, sustenance and wisdom.

### **Declaration AI Tools Utilization**

I do hereby declare the use AI tools, such as Chat GPT and Grammarly for grammar checking and sentence organization purposes only.

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