

Examining the role of cultural competence in the conflict management skills of public secondary school administrators in southern Nueva Vizcaya

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Abstract

This study employed a quantitative research design using the descriptive-correlational method to investigate the role of cultural competence in the conflict management skills of school administrators in public secondary schools in Southern Nueva Vizcaya. The study involved 15 school principals and 98 teachers, with data collected during the last quarter of 2024 and the first quarter of 2025 using reliable research instruments. The findings revealed that both cultural competence and conflict management skills of school heads were generally rated within the "Proficient" range. The overall mean for cultural competence was 3.50, with teachers rating it 3.45 and school heads rating themselves slightly higher at 3.56. In terms of conflict management skills, the overall mean was 3.53, indicating proficiency, with areas like empathy, creative problem solving, and conflict resolution scoring the highest. A significant positive correlation ($r = 0.612$, $p = 0.000$) was found between cultural competence and conflict management skills. Furthermore, significant differences were observed between the perceptions of teachers and school heads, particularly in the dimensions of "Awareness of Others" in cultural competence and "Creative Problem Solving" in conflict management skills. Based on these findings, it is recommended to develop training programs focusing on enhancing specific areas such as open attitude, self-awareness, communication, and emotional intelligence. The study also suggests that further research be conducted with a broader sample to assess the influence of other variables, such as demographic factors, on cultural competence and conflict management. Replicating the study in other regions could also yield more generalized insights.

Keywords: conflict management skills, cultural competence, training design

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1. Introduction

In today's increasingly diverse educational landscape, school administrators are at the forefront of navigating complex interpersonal dynamics among students, teachers, parents, and various stakeholders. One of the foremost challenges they encounter is managing conflict in culturally diverse environments. As schools in the Philippines—and specifically those located in the multicultural communities of Southern Nueva Vizcaya—continue to reflect the growing diversity of the nation's population, the demand for culturally competent and adaptive leadership becomes more urgent. The ability of school administrators to manage conflict effectively is no longer rooted solely in traditional leadership or communication skills. It now hinges significantly on their capacity to understand, respect, and bridge cultural differences, which often serve as underlying sources of misunderstanding and tension. This study explores the vital role of cultural competence in shaping the conflict management skills of public secondary school administrators in Southern Nueva Vizcaya.

Cultural competence is broadly defined as the ability to interact effectively with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It encompasses awareness of one's own cultural identity, sensitivity to cultural differences, knowledge of other cultural worldviews, and the practical ability to adapt behaviors and communication styles accordingly (Sue, Rasheed, & Rasheed, 2019). In the educational context, cultural competence is an essential skill for school leaders who must create safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environments for students and staff from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. It fosters empathy, reduces miscommunication, and builds interpersonal trust—all of which are vital in preventing, de-escalating, and resolving conflicts.

Conflict management, on the other hand, refers to the systematic process of addressing and resolving disputes in ways that are constructive rather than destructive. In schools, conflicts commonly arise from a multitude of sources, including value differences, power imbalances, communication breakdowns, and interpersonal misunderstandings. These issues are often exacerbated in culturally diverse settings where differing norms, expectations, and communication styles prevail. According to Rahim (2017), effective conflict management is fundamental to sustaining positive relationships, promoting organizational stability, and achieving educational objectives. For school administrators, this means not only responding to conflict but also understanding its cultural dimensions, identifying root causes, and fostering long-term resolution through culturally responsive leadership.

In the case of Southern Nueva Vizcaya, a province known for its vibrant cultural mosaic, the presence of indigenous communities, lowland settlers, and migrant populations creates a unique context for school leadership. Each group brings its own set of traditions, communication practices, and conflict resolution norms. Public secondary schools in these municipalities are microcosms of this cultural diversity. Administrators in these schools must therefore be equipped with the competence to interpret behaviors and perspectives within appropriate cultural frameworks. Unfortunately, empirical investigations that specifically examine how cultural competence impacts the conflict management strategies of school leaders in such multi-ethnic contexts remain limited. This gap underscores the need for localized, evidence-based research that informs the professional development of culturally competent educational leaders.

This study is designed to address that gap by determining the extent to which cultural competence influences the conflict management skills of public secondary school administrators in Southern Nueva Vizcaya. Specifically, it aims to assess the correlation between the administrators' level of cultural competence and their preferred conflict management styles and practices. By identifying this relationship, the study intends to offer insights into how cultural awareness and adaptability translate into practical leadership strategies in the field of

conflict resolution. The findings are expected to inform the development of culturally responsive leadership training programs, institutional policies, and school-based conflict resolution models that align with the cultural realities of Philippine public education.

The theoretical foundations of this study are anchored in Deardorff's (2006) intercultural competence model and Thomas and Kilmann's (2007) conflict management theory. Deardorff conceptualizes intercultural competence as a developmental process involving internal outcomes such as adaptability, empathy, and cultural self-awareness, which in turn influence external behaviors. These internal dispositions are particularly valuable for school administrators tasked with resolving conflicts in multicultural settings. Complementing this framework is the conflict management theory of Thomas and Kilmann, which outlines five conflict-handling styles: competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating. The model suggests that individuals adapt their conflict responses depending on their goals and the nature of the interpersonal relationship. When applied to school administration, this framework helps in analyzing the varying conflict resolution behaviors of leaders, particularly in situations that are shaped by cultural dynamics.

Integrating these two theoretical models allows for a nuanced understanding of how cultural competence not only enhances interpersonal awareness but also shapes the way conflicts are perceived, approached, and resolved by school administrators. For instance, an administrator with high cultural empathy may prefer collaborative or accommodating styles in managing disputes, especially when cultural misunderstanding is at the root of the problem. Conversely, a lack of cultural competence may lead to ineffective responses, such as avoidance or confrontation, that further exacerbate conflict.

Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the growing discourse on culturally grounded leadership in Philippine education. By highlighting the intersection of cultural competence and conflict management, it aims to provide empirical evidence that supports the need for inclusive and adaptive leadership training among school administrators. The goal is not only to empower school leaders to manage conflicts more effectively but also to promote a school culture where diversity is embraced, equity is advanced, and learning thrives in an environment of mutual respect and understanding.

2. Related Literature

In today's globalized and culturally diverse societies, educational institutions have become microcosms of the broader multicultural world. The ability of school administrators to navigate cultural diversity and effectively manage conflicts is increasingly recognized as critical to school leadership. The literature reveals a strong interconnection between cultural competence and conflict management, particularly in educational settings characterized by cultural heterogeneity.

Cultural Competence in Educational Leadership. Cultural competence is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable effective work in cross-cultural situations (National Education Association, 2018). In the realm of educational leadership, cultural competence is more than awareness; it is the capacity to respond appropriately to the complex needs of students and teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds. According to Lindsey et al. (2019), culturally proficient leaders are those who value diversity, manage the dynamics of difference, and institutionalize cultural knowledge in their school systems.

Banks (2020) emphasizes that multicultural education frameworks equip administrators to foster inclusive and equitable learning environments. This includes the development of culturally responsive communication strategies, teaching practices, and disciplinary approaches that respect cultural differences. The need for such competence is particularly important in contexts like Southern Nueva Vizcaya, where diverse ethno-linguistic communities converge within the educational system.

Conflict Management in Schools. Conflict is an inevitable element in school systems, arising from divergent expectations, values, roles, and relationships among teachers, students, parents, and administrators.

According to Omale and Omale (2021), effective conflict management is essential in creating a positive school climate. Poorly handled conflict can result in low morale, teacher burnout, and student disengagement. Conversely, conflict that is managed constructively can lead to growth, innovation, and stronger relationships.

School administrators employ various conflict management styles including collaboration, avoidance, accommodation, competition, and compromise (Thomas & Kilmann, 2007). These styles are often influenced by the administrator's personality, organizational culture, and level of emotional intelligence. Recent studies suggest that cultural factors also significantly influence the preferred modes of conflict resolution (Chen et al., 2020).

Link Between Cultural Competence and Conflict Management. Emerging research indicates a strong correlation between cultural competence and effective conflict management. Administrators who possess high levels of cultural awareness and sensitivity are better able to identify culturally rooted causes of conflict and respond in ways that de-escalate tensions rather than exacerbate them. For instance, Johnson and Radhakrishnan (2021) found that school leaders who participated in cultural competence training reported fewer incidents of conflict escalation and demonstrated greater skill in mediating disputes among culturally diverse staff and students. Furthermore, Fiedler and Garcia (2022) assert that cultural competence enhances administrators' ability to interpret the behaviors and communication styles of individuals from different backgrounds. Misinterpretations due to cultural misunderstandings are a common cause of conflict in schools. Administrators equipped with intercultural communication skills are more likely to adopt conflict management strategies that are perceived as fair and respectful by all parties involved.

Cultural Diversity in the Philippine Educational Context. In the Philippine setting, cultural diversity is a defining feature of the educational landscape. According to Malipot (2021), schools in multicultural provinces such as Nueva Vizcaya serve students from indigenous communities, migrant populations, and various ethno-linguistic groups. The Department of Education has emphasized the importance of inclusive education and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into the curriculum. However, despite these efforts, gaps remain in the cultural competence training of school administrators. Dizon and Tolentino (2018) argue that many public-school leaders lack the preparation to handle cultural tensions in their schools, which can lead to mismanagement of conflicts and weakened trust between administrators and community members.

Professional Development and Leadership Training. To address this challenge, professional development programs are increasingly incorporating cultural competence as a core component. According to Garcia and Santos (2022), training modules that blend theory with practical scenarios enhance the capacity of administrators to understand cultural dynamics and to resolve conflicts more effectively. Such programs are especially important in rural or under-resourced areas where cultural divides may be more pronounced and less discussed openly. In line with this, Mendoza and Cruz (2023) recommend integrating intercultural conflict resolution training in pre-service and in-service programs for school leaders. Their study showed that administrators who underwent training demonstrated improved self-awareness, communication skills, and adaptability in conflict-laden situations.

Implications for School Governance. The literature strongly supports the integration of cultural competence into the conflict management framework of school administrators. As schools become more culturally diverse, administrators must evolve to become not only instructional leaders but also cultural mediators. Developing cultural competence is no longer optional—it is an essential skill set for equitable and effective school governance.

3. Methodology

Research Design. This study employed a quantitative research design, specifically utilizing the descriptive-correlational method, to examine the determining role of cultural competence in the conflict management skills of school administrators, as perceived by both the administrators themselves and their teachers in public secondary schools in southern Nueva Vizcaya during the academic year 2023–2024.

Research Environment. This study was conducted among secondary schools in Southern Nueva Vizcaya that provide a diverse and complex environment for this study, showcasing various community settings that directly influence educational leadership, cultural competence, and conflict management skills. The schools involved in this research include both semi-urban and indigenous community schools, reflecting the region's rich socio-cultural landscape.

Respondents of the Study. The respondents of the study were the 15 school principals of the public secondary schools in southern Nueva Vizcaya which were chosen through purposive sampling technique, and 98 teachers or 19.80 percent from the 495 total population of teachers from the public secondary schools in southern Nueva Vizcaya.

Sampling Procedure. In this study, the researcher employed a stratified sampling technique to select a total of 98 teacher-respondents from public secondary schools in Southern Nueva Vizcaya. The sample size was determined using Yamane's formula, applying a 9.5% margin of error to ensure statistical reliability while maintaining a manageable sample. Each public secondary school functioned as a distinct stratum, allowing for proportional representation across the various school settings. Meanwhile, the school heads were selected using a purposive sampling technique, targeting individuals who hold specific administrative roles and are directly involved in school management. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. These measures were taken to uphold the ethical standards of research and ensure the integrity of the study's findings.

Research Instruments. The salient data needed in this investigation were collected using the following instruments.

- **Cultural Competencies Self – Assessment Checklist.** The instrument used to measure the level of cultural competence among public secondary school administrators was adapted from the Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society (2000). This established tool was selected for its comprehensive coverage of key dimensions of cultural competence relevant to educational leadership. To ensure the appropriateness, relevance, and clarity of the instrument in the local context, it underwent rigorous expert and content validation.
- **Conflict Management Survey Checklist.** This research instrument was employed to assess the disposition or opinion of respondents regarding the conflict management styles of school heads. The tool was adopted from Pancho (2005), whose work offers a validated framework for understanding leadership and conflict resolution approaches in educational settings. To ensure its contextual relevance and content validity, the questionnaire underwent a rigorous expert and content validation process.

Statistical Treatment of Data. To treat the data gathered from the respondents, the following statistical tools were used:

- **Mean.** This was used to determine the levels of cultural competence and conflict management skills of school head as perceived by themselves and their teachers.
- **Pearson – r.** This was used to determine the correlation between the perceived cultural competence and conflict management skills of the respondents.
- **Coefficient of Determination.** This was used to establish the proportion of the variance in the dependent variable that can be explained by the independent variable(s) in the regression model.

4. Results and Discussion

Problem 1. What is the level of cultural competence of the school heads of Southern Nueva Vizcaya?

Table 1

Respondents' perception of the level of cultural competence of the school heads of Southern Nueva Vizcaya

Cultural Competence	Teacher Respondent	School Heads	Area Mean
Open Attitude	3.41 Proficient	3.44 Proficient	3.42 Proficient
Self-Awareness	3.44 Proficient	3.47 Proficient	3.45 Proficient
Awareness of Others	3.47 Proficient	3.72 Proficient	3.59 Proficient
Cultural Knowledge	3.46 Proficient	3.58 Proficient	3.52 Proficient
Cultural Skills	3.47 Proficient	3.59 Proficient	3.53 Proficient
Grand Mean	3.45 Proficient	3.56 Proficient	3.50 Proficient

Data in Table 1 indicates that the grand mean of 3.50 indicates that the school heads of Southern Nueva Vizcaya are perceived to possess a *proficient* level of cultural competence. This suggests that, overall, both teacher respondents and the school heads themselves recognize the presence of strong cultural awareness, understanding, and responsiveness within school leadership. Such proficiency is vital in fostering inclusive and respectful school environments, particularly in culturally diverse communities.

Among the five dimensions, Awareness of Others received the highest area mean of 3.59, indicating that school heads are most proficient in recognizing and valuing cultural differences in others. This highlights their capacity to build meaningful and inclusive relationships with students, teachers, and stakeholders from diverse backgrounds. Following this, Cultural Skills ranked second with an area mean of 3.53. This reflects the school heads' ability to effectively apply cultural knowledge and attitudes in day-to-day interactions and decision-making processes. Cultural Knowledge came next with an area mean of 3.52, suggesting that school heads possess a solid understanding of cultural traditions, values, and practices that inform their leadership style.

The Self-Awareness dimension had a slightly lower area mean of 3.45, though still within the proficient range. This implies that while school heads have a reasonable awareness of their own cultural identity and biases, there remains an opportunity for deeper reflection and growth in this area. Lastly, Open Attitude was rated the lowest, with an area mean of 3.42. Despite being classified as proficient, this score suggests that school heads may need to further cultivate openness and receptiveness to new and differing cultural perspectives to strengthen their cultural competence.

Problem 2. What is the level of conflict management skills of the school heads in Southern Nueva Vizcaya?

Based on the data presented in Table 2, the grand mean of 3.53 indicates that the conflict management skills of school heads in Southern Nueva Vizcaya are "manifested to a very great extent" as perceived by both teacher and school head respondents. This suggests that, overall, school leaders consistently demonstrate strong capabilities in managing conflicts within their schools, which is a crucial element in fostering a positive school climate and sustaining effective professional relationships.

Table 2
Respondents' perception on the level of conflict management skills of school heads of Southern Nueva Vizcaya

Conflict Management Skills	Teachers Respondent	School Heads	Area Mean
Communication	3.42 Manifested to a Very Great Extent	3.49 Manifested to a Very Great Extent	3.45 Manifested to a Very Great Extent
Emotional Intelligence	3.47 Manifested to a Very Great Extent	3.29 Manifested to a Very Great Extent	3.38 Manifested to a Very Great Extent
Empathy	3.55 Manifested to a Very Great Extent	3.67 Manifested to a Very Great Extent	3.61 Manifested to a Very Great Extent
Creative Problem Solving	3.51 Manifested to a Very Great Extent	3.67 Manifested to a Very Great Extent	3.59 Manifested to a Very Great Extent
Conflict Resolution Skill	3.50 Manifested to a Very Great Extent	3.67 Manifested to a Very Great Extent	3.59 Manifested to a Very Great Extent
Grand Mean	3.49 Manifested to a Very Great Extent	3.56 Manifested to a Very Great Extent	3.53 Manifested to a Very Great Extent

Among the five dimensions assessed, Empathy and Conflict Resolution Skills emerged with the highest area mean of 3.61 and 3.59, respectively, both interpreted as "manifested to a very great extent." This indicates that school heads are highly effective in understanding the feelings and perspectives of others and are adept at resolving disputes constructively. Their strong empathy enables them to approach conflicts with sensitivity, while their conflict resolution abilities ensure timely and appropriate interventions.

Creative Problem Solving also shares an area mean of 3.59, highlighting the school heads' capacity to think critically and innovatively when addressing complex issues or disagreements. This skill enhances their ability to mediate and de-escalate conflicts using flexible and adaptive strategies. Communication received a slightly lower area mean of 3.45, yet it still falls within the "very great extent" range. This suggests that while school heads are generally effective communicators, there may still be room for improvement in consistently delivering clear, transparent, and inclusive messages during conflict situations. Lastly, Emotional Intelligence had the lowest area mean of 3.38, although it remains within the same high interpretation. This result may imply that some school heads could benefit from further development in managing their own emotions and recognizing emotional cues in others during conflicts.

It is noted by the researcher that the findings reflect that school heads possess strong conflict management skills across all dimensions, with particular strengths in empathy, problem-solving, and conflict resolution, while communication and emotional intelligence, though still well-manifested, present opportunities for further enhancement.

Problem 3. Is there a significant correlation among the respondents' cultural competence and conflict management skills?

It can be seen in Table 3 that there is a significant relationship between the respondents assessed level of cultural competence and assessed level of conflict management skills with a computed r - value of 0.612 and p - value of 0.000. Thus, the findings lead to the acceptance of the null - hypothesis of the study.

Table 3*Correlation results between the respondent's level of cultural competence and conflict management skills (113)*

Variables Correlated		Computed r-value	Critical r-value	Coefficient of Determination	Remarks
Cultural Competence	VS	0.612 (moderate positive correlation)	0.1840	37.45%	Very Significant
Conflict Management Skills					
Degrees of Freedom: 112 p-value:0.000					

The results of the correlation analysis in Table 3 reveal a moderate positive relationship between the respondents' level of cultural competence and their conflict management skills, as indicated by the computed r-value of 0.612. This correlation is statistically very significant ($p = 0.000$), demonstrating that the association between the two variables is highly unlikely to have occurred by chance. The data suggest that individuals who demonstrate greater cultural competence are more likely to possess effective conflict management skills. This relationship is especially relevant in the context of educational settings, where school personnel interact with diverse groups of students, parents, and colleagues. A deeper understanding and appreciation of cultural differences appear to be associated with better emotional regulation, communication, empathy, and creative problem-solving—all key components of conflict resolution.

The coefficient of determination (r^2), calculated at 37.45%, provides further insight into the strength of this relationship. It indicates that over one-third of the variance in conflict management skills can be explained by differences in cultural competence. This is a substantial proportion and suggests that cultural competence is a critical foundational skill that supports the development of effective conflict-handling strategies. The remaining 62.55% of variance may be influenced by other variables such as leadership experience, personal disposition, or professional development opportunities. Nonetheless, the results highlight the need for schools to invest in ongoing training programs that develop both cultural competence and conflict resolution, fostering a more inclusive and collaborative school climate.

5. Conclusions

Based on the significant findings of the study, the following conclusions are drawn.

- The overall level of cultural competence among school heads and teachers in Southern Nueva Vizcaya is proficient, with both groups demonstrating strong cultural competence within the "Proficient" range. School heads rated themselves slightly higher than teachers, yet both groups displayed comparable levels of cultural awareness.
- The conflict management skills of school heads in Southern Nueva Vizcaya are highly developed, indicating proficiency at a very great extent. Skills such as empathy, creative problem-solving, and conflict resolution are particularly strong, while emotional intelligence showed slightly lower proficiency compared to other conflict management skills.
- A significant positive correlation between cultural competence and conflict management skills was found, suggesting that enhancing one of these areas may contribute to the improvement of the other.

Recommendations - Based on the significant findings and conclusions, the following recommendations were offered.

- Given the slightly lower ratings for "open attitude" and "self-awareness" in cultural competence, it is recommended that school heads and teachers engage in targeted professional development activities

aimed at enhancing these areas. Workshops, seminars, and training that promote open-mindedness and self-reflection can be incorporated into the professional development calendar to improve cultural sensitivity and self-awareness in the school leadership context.

- Although the overall conflict management skills were rated positively, emotional intelligence and communication were identified as areas for improvement. Training sessions focused on emotional regulation, active listening, and effective communication strategies can help school heads and teachers handle conflict more constructively. It is recommended to offer workshops or role-playing exercises that simulate real-life conflict scenarios, allowing participants to practice and enhance these key conflict management skills.
- The positive correlation between cultural competence and conflict management skills suggests that these areas are interconnected. It is recommended that professional development programs for school heads and teachers integrate both cultural competence and conflict management training. An integrated curriculum would allow participants to recognize the interrelationship between understanding cultural diversity and effectively managing conflicts, ensuring a holistic approach to school leadership.

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