

A case study of successful leadership by an elementary school principal in Japan

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the characteristics and strategies of successful school leadership in a specific school in Japan, focusing on leadership values, identity and practices, and how stakeholders within and across the education system, including the principal, teachers, students, parents and community members, perceive successful school leadership in the context.

Design/methodology/approach – This study utilised a multi-perspective single case study approach using individual and focus group interviews with a principal, teachers, students, parents and community members, as well as a survey of the principal and teachers in an urban Japanese school. The interview and survey questions follow the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) protocol. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured interviews. Discourse analysis was adopted for the qualitative data. The quantitative survey data were used to complement the qualitative analysis.

Findings – Three key characteristics of successful principal leadership in this particular case were identified: Vision and communication of the principal, decision-making through a data-driven improvement cycle and leadership mix. First, the principal communicated his values and disseminated them through inquiry-based learning as a tool for change at the school. Second, the principal identifies issues and makes quick decisions through short cycles of data-driven improvement. Third, the principal balanced top-down and bottom-up leadership, using a hierarchical approach to vision while promoting teacher autonomy through professional development.

Originality/value – This case study contributes to the literature on school leadership in Japan, addressing the paucity of research that emphasises “success” in a collective and hierarchical cultural context. Moreover, this

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study explores leadership from the diverse perspectives of other important stakeholders, including the principal, teachers, students, parents and community members.

Keywords School principal, Leadership, ISSPP, Ecological system theory

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Despite Japan's high levels of academic achievement among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD, 2023), challenges remain in terms of non-cognitive aspects, equivalent to the socio-emotional learning in the Western context (Sato, 2024). For example, Japanese students' self-efficacy on self-directed learning is much lower than the OECD average (National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2023). In 2023, the Japanese government set the educational policy to support students to enhance their non-cognitive abilities, such as engagement, self-esteem, empathy and collaboration (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2023). School success in Japan began to be viewed as the comprehensive development of both cognitive and non-cognitive skills (Sato, 2024). Principal leadership has come to play a major role in this context, whereby Japanese educational policy has called for decentralisation and school autonomy since the 1990s (Yokota, 2019).

The "successful leadership" of principals that contributes to comprehensive school success has been identified around the International Successful School Principalship Project (ISSPP) (Gunnulfsen *et al.*, 2022), although different theoretical concepts and methodologies about successful leadership have been used in various cultural cases, such as Anglo-American and Scandinavian ones (e.g. Jacobson and Day, 2007). However, most cases are still from Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and the Scandinavian countries (Gunnulfsen *et al.*, 2022; Johnson *et al.*, 2023). Cases from Asian countries are still limited, especially from Japan (Johnson *et al.*, 2008; Triandis, 2001). Sato and Yada (2023) point out that Japanese principal leadership studies focus on "professional standards for principals" and "principals' competence", and there is a paucity of research that emphasises "success" as a key concept. Although Sato (2024) shows the characteristics of successful leadership with a case in a high school in Japan, there is no study that focuses on Japanese principals in compulsory education, who have a significant impact on the comprehensive development of cognitive and non-cognitive aspects. Moreover, previous studies on successful principal leadership have mostly relied on principals' self-reports, providing only a partial view of leadership practices that may overlook the diverse perspectives of other important stakeholders, including teachers, students, parents and community members (Gunnulfsen *et al.*, 2022). To provide a broader understanding of successful principal leadership, this study aims to explore the characteristics and strategies of successful school leadership in a particular case in Japan, focusing on the unique aspects of leadership values, identity, and practices and how stakeholders within and across the education system perceive successful school leadership.

Theoretical background

ISSPP research using the system-oriented approach

This study is based on the principles of ISSPP (Day and Gurr, 2013; Gunnulfsen *et al.*, 2022). This decades-long project has identified key practices and characteristics of successful school principals in different country contexts (Gurr and Moyi, 2022). The new phase of ISSPP is situated in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory (EST), using complex and system thinking views.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST describes the active role of humans who are surrounded and influenced by multi-layered contexts of different sociocultural environments. EST emphasises that multi-layered systems interact with and influence each other. These systems range from

the most intimate ecological systems to the larger school system, including society, culture, links between the systems and the element of time that recognises change and complexity (ISSPP, 2022). Educational leadership researchers argue that principals are surrounded by systems: macrosystem (sociocultural norms, educational policy), exosystem (local government policy and budget decisions, community resources), mesosystem (mutual influence among principals, teachers, students and parents), microsystem (relationships and environment among principals, teachers, students and parents) and chronosystem (school context and changes in the principal's career and competencies) (e.g. Elomaa *et al.*, 2024).

Taking the EST perspective enables us to explore the relationships between system levels (e.g. between principals and middle leaders, or between governance and policy enactment) over time and at key points during strategy and process enactment (ISSPP, 2022).

A principal's leadership plays a pivotal role as a mediator of change, ultimately impacting all aspects of students' learning (Jacobson and Day, 2007). Principals lead and influence change in school education and culture through interacting and negotiating with contextual factors such as national and local educational policies and characteristics of the community and the school (Johnson *et al.*, 2008). Principals' effectiveness in fostering change is contingent upon the specific context in which they operate (Gunnulfson *et al.*, 2022). Thus, it is essential for the principal to accurately assess the areas to change and adopt a contextually appropriate approach to drive meaningful change (Gurr *et al.*, 2006).

Moreover, how the principal facilitates change is important. For example, the principal may implement new instructional methods or enhance professional development for teachers to initiate changes (Gurr *et al.*, 2006). However, changes are not always observable. To influence attitudes or values, the principal could clarify and disseminate the school's vision, mission and goals, ensuring that these are internalised and shared by the entire school community (Gurr *et al.*, 2006; Johnson *et al.*, 2023). Change also includes creating a supportive organisational culture or environment that increases teachers' agency to drive change (Johnson *et al.*, 2023).

Political, educational and cultural contexts surrounding principals and schools in Japan

National education policies are determined and implemented by MEXT, while most elementary schools are operated by municipalities. To ensure the quality, each prefecture and municipality has its own board of education, which manages operation of the schools and teacher resources (Yokota, 2019).

MEXT revises the National Curriculum (the Course of Study) approximately every 10 years, which has a great deal of control over education at each school. Teachers have long focused on tailoring the National Curriculum to local conditions and the needs of individual children. Recently, the National Curriculum has emphasised the ability of children to think, judge and express their ideas based on their own experiences and to apply what they have learned to their lives. Therefore, "Period for Integrated Studies" has been introduced since 2000 to emphasise inquiry-based learning. Moreover, the latest Course of Study also incorporates learning to discover and solve social issues in subjects, emphasising collaborative and interactive learning based on students' experiences. Non-cognitive aspects of learning are expected to be developed through these curricula. To provide new educational directions and classroom improvements, teachers engage in "research and training", which is a form of professional development and is stipulated in the Basic Act on Education (MEXT, 2024a). Research and training are usually done by a form of lesson study (Lewis *et al.*, 2012).

As a result of the demand for autonomous school management, the law requires each school to set goals and engage in evaluation and improvement based on the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle, thereby fulfilling its accountability to stakeholders (School Education Act, Article 42; Enforcement of the School Education Act, Article 66). For this purpose, schools conduct assessments in various aspects such as students' learning and health and safety. In response, principals initiate school improvements by consolidating and analysing data in their contexts. However, regarding teaching personnel, each municipal board of education is responsible for

hiring, employment and dismissal. Principals usually change schools every two to five years, and teachers typically change every three to seven years under the instruction of the board of education. The average age of Japanese principals is 54.4 years (MEXT, 2024b). Therefore, the term of principal for an individual is often short and limited to a single school, which makes it difficult for some principals to take actions for change.

Principals are required to follow instructions from MEXT and the board of education, which establishes a centralised hierarchical structure (Yokota, 2019). A principal is defined as the person who makes the final decision on matters in the school (Enforcement of the School Education Act, Article 20). This is followed by the chain of command, which consists of the vice-principal, the head teacher, and the guidance teacher (School Education Act, Article 37), reinforcing the top-down structure. The Japanese educational system, with this hierarchical structure, is more conducive to educational activities by superiors and subordinates (Yokota, 2019; Triandis, 2001).

In cultural terms, while many organisations in Japan have a hierarchical structure, schools have a strong culture of collectivism and tend to prioritise the interests and approval of the group over the individual (Yokota, 2019). Teamwork and cooperation are emphasised in schools, and the alignment of the grade level or subject-level teams is valued more than individual teachers. For this reason, principals are also expected to promote harmony and cooperation throughout the school.

Although the autonomy of each school and teacher is promoted, it is not fully guaranteed. Some teachers autonomously conduct educational activities, while others remain passive. One of the main issues that hinder teacher autonomy is teachers' busyness and curriculum overload (Kambayashi, 2017). Moreover, the age imbalance among teachers due to the mass hiring of young teachers and the declining number of applicants for teaching positions may compound the issue.

A systematic narrative review (Sato and Yada, 2023) indicates that many studies of school leaders, such as principals, vice-principals and educational boards, in Japan focus on their role, competences and leadership in relation to school improvement. However, these studies focus on school leaders individually, and do not comprehensively explore how different stakeholders in political, educational and contextual contexts relate to school success.

Research questions

ISSPP (2022) sets nine research questions to provide a multi-perspective and detailed understanding of the social and ecological phenomena of successful principals' leadership. This study focuses on the research question that clarifies the characteristics of successful leadership in a Japanese context with a case study:

- RQ. What are the leadership characteristics and specific strategies of the principal to achieve "success" in a certain school in Japan and how do different key stakeholders within and outside the school community, including the principal, teachers, students, parents and community members, perceive them there?

Method

Research design

This is a multi-perspective single-case study conducted in an urban school in Japan. It adopted a case study approach (Creswell and Poth, 2018) using individual and focus group interviews of a principal, teachers, students, parents and community council members as well as a survey of the principal and teachers as supplemental data.

School setting

X school is a public elementary school and has approximately 400 students, with two groups per grade from first to sixth grade. The area in which the school is located has rich historical and cultural assets and is relatively stable socioeconomically, with little inequality. Moreover,

there is a relatively high number of self-employed people and few transferees in the area. Hence, there are strong ties between local residents, who are supportive of the schools, and there is good cooperation between the schools and the local community.

The principal started working at this school four years ago. Before this position, he worked as the vice principal for four years and as a teacher for 28 years in other schools. When he first arrived, it was a time under COVID-19 restrictions when schools were closed, and children were asked to avoid contact. The school was facing an issue whereby it was difficult for students to form successful peer relationships. There were also reports of bullying. A further issue was a lack of willingness to engage in learning activities and to try or take on new things. The principal also noticed some challenges of the school, which are common problems for the Japanese educational system. First, the succession of good educational practices was not going well due to the uneven age distribution of the teachers. Second, there were differences in enthusiasm for education and research among the teachers. Third, there was a problem of curriculum overload, and the teachers were too busy to face the first and second challenges. However, the school has exemplified many elements of what can be considered success since his appointment. First, while the increase in truancy has become a social problem in Japan in recent years, the school is respected with a reputation for “zero truancy”. Second, the school was selected as a research partner school (2022–2024) by the municipality, focusing on the development of the Period for Integrated Studies. This shows the school aims to foster students’ non-cognitive aspects through their learning. Finally, the students’ self-assessment about the abilities that the school wants to develop has gradually increased over the years (see Appendix 1; [Yada, 2025a](#)).

Participants

The X school has one principal, 21 teachers and about 400 students. Individual interviews were conducted with one principal (male; 110 min) and nine teachers (five male, four female; 50 min each). Focus group interviews were held with five parents and five community council members (50 min each). The interviews were conducted using semi-structured interviews. In the finding section, the participants of the interviews are referred to as T (teacher), S (student), PA (parent) and CM (community member). Their demographic information is not given to avoid the identification of individuals.

In addition to the qualitative data collection, 95% of the teaching staff, including the principal and 20 teachers (seven males and 13 females), answered the survey (Appendix 2; [Yada, 2025b](#)).

Instruments

The interview and survey questions focus on key aspects of school success, such as leadership value, efficacy, teacher experience and school culture. The interview questions in the semi-structured interviews and the focus groups follow ISSPP’s protocol ([ISSPP, 2022](#)) to explore successful school leadership. The questions include, for example, “How have you developed as a leader over time?” (for principal) and “How would you define a successful school?” (for teachers).

In addition, the survey questions developed within the ISSPP research framework address school culture, leadership support and the concept of the school as a community, using a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree) ([ISSPP, 2022](#)).

These questions provide insights into how various stakeholders, including the principal, teachers, students, parents and community members, perceive successful school leadership, directly supporting our research questions ([ISSPP, 2022](#)).

Procedures

The data collection was conducted between December 2023 and February 2024. Two of the researchers visited the school five times during the term and conducted all interviews and survey data collection.

This study was approved by the Ethical Review Committee of the university of one of the researchers (number 2023–186). The decision followed the ethical guidelines of Japanese research institutions (Science Council of Japan, 2013). Before the interviews and the survey, the researchers explained the purpose of the study to the participants and assured them of voluntary participation and complete confidentiality and anonymity.

Data analysis

Discourse analysis was selected for the qualitative data to explore how the participants construct and negotiate meanings around school leadership practices (Creswell and Poth, 2018). To provide a detailed understanding of the phenomena, the findings of the qualitative data analysis are fully reported, while the survey results are used to complement the qualitative data.

To ensure trustworthiness in this study, a structured analysis framework with peer review was employed (Stahl and King, 2020). To enhance credibility, two authors conducted a narrative analysis. Subsequently, the other authors discussed the themes and interpretations, thereby achieving a level of agreement on themes. Triangulation was employed by using qualitative data as the main analysis, with quantitative data, which were descriptively analysed, serving as a supplement to reinforce the qualitative findings. Dependability was addressed through audit trails, documenting each step of the analysis process, including coding decisions and theme development. To establish confirmability, the authors regularly discussed interpretations to minimise subjective influence. Finally, transferability was ensured with rich and thick descriptions of the findings, allowing readers to assess whether the findings could be applicable to other contexts.

Findings

This study found three characteristics that contributed to success in the school: vision and communication, decision-making through a data-driven improvement cycle, and leadership mix. It also found that the principal worked on five strategies to promote the characteristics.

Vision and communication of the principal: school management focusing on inquiry-based learning

Principal: I've had a lot of experience with environmental education . . . I think the experience of that time has become a part of me, like the power to live and the way of looking at things . . . I think it's an important and necessary non-cognitive ability for children when they go out into society.

The principal specialised in environmental education and had implemented learning activities focusing on the realities of life as a teacher. He recognised the role of the school in promoting education that encourages students' participation in the process. Therefore, the principal developed the following school *mission*: "Promoting education that values the harmony of prospecting (knowledge), affiliating (moral) and challenging (well-being) – giving each child a sense of being cared for." According to the mission, the school set their *vision* to implement educational activities that enable students to respect each other, help each other, participate in society proactively and create futures.

Based on the vision, the principal set the educational *values* for students and teachers in this school. The values for students are summed up as "a student who considers and is full of spirit and energy". Teachers' values include, for example, a teacher who develops the good aspects and potential of students. The principal has tried to build a learning community supported by teachers' professional development:

Principal: Participation. I want people to take action and move things forward. They need to take action . . . In order for the school to be like that, I want the teachers to love research, to continue it, to think it is meaningful, and to pass it on to the younger students.

The principal's values and vision, and goals, were mostly positively accepted by teachers, students, parents, and local residents. Many teachers are engaged in hands-on activities, such

as growing and harvesting crops in the fields, which is an initiative of the principal as part of environmental education. The answers appeared to be positive about the principal's initiative:

T1: I think it is becoming rare to see principals speaking to students from their own experience at schools.

PA1: He was good at growing killifish and vegetables. My child had no interest in such things, but the teacher invited him to give it a try, and he really enjoyed it.

CM1: They put the children first and do it so in an interesting way. I feel that they have an outlook about what they would do in the next year and the next semester.

Strategy 1: repeated communication. The principal repeatedly communicates the above-mentioned mission, vision and value. For students, this was done using easy-to-understand catchphrases such as “one step above”, while for teachers, the communication was based on the national and global educational trends and research findings. The principal's values and actions towards achieving the school goals were promoted by the way he communicated with the teachers and students. For example, the following narratives were observed:

T4: He shows us all the information. He talks about it during staff meetings where everyone can share the information . . . instead of just talking about it individually.

S1: [The principal] is actively sending out catch phrases like ‘one step above’ . . . He teaches us many things, so it's a good opportunity for us to grow.

This is because he was convinced that inquiry-based learning would benefit the growth of children and teachers. Although the principal forcefully initiated the research partner school approach to inquiry-based learning, many teachers did not express negative views about the forcefulness of this initiative. Rather, they expressed sympathy for the vision and appreciation for its clarity:

T1. I am very grateful to the principal for pointing out to me that if I aim for this kind of thing, I can have this kind of vision as a research project.

T2. I would like to improve teachers' teaching skills.

However, some teachers did not have a deep understanding of the teachers' professional development and its relationship with the research partnership activity. They felt burdened to do so within the current curriculum:

T2: Although Japanese and Social Studies are well connected, we cannot devote all our energy to [inquiry-based learning]. It would be good if the principal could understand this and change the distribution of the classes a little more.

Some parents also explained their wish to see more emphasis placed on basic academic and cognitive skills and the learning activities for the skills, as follows:

PA2: I understand that you are pursuing non-cognitive abilities, but if you don't make sure that the base learning is done properly, my child really doesn't like studying because of it.

On the other hand, the children were aware of their own growing non-cognitive skills and expressed positive views about them:

S1: I have definitely learned to care for others. Before I entered kindergarten and elementary school . . . I thought the world revolved around me . . . but after entering sixth grade in elementary school, I gradually learned to be kind to others.

S2: I learned to be patient and how to control my feelings . . . During discussions, I listened to other people's opinions and acknowledged their points of view, and then I began to speak my mind.

Decision-making through a data-driven improvement cycle

The principal promoted decision-making through a data-driven improvement cycle. The decision-making promotes inquiry-based learning and the succession of good educational methods among teachers, thereby encouraging their enthusiasm.

Strategy 2: implementation of periodic education improvement. The principal utilised the data in two ways: accelerating school improvement and mitigating the relationships with teachers. First, to understand the current situation and the effectiveness of educational practices, a teacher questionnaire regarding the students and teachers has been conducted every trimester. This enabled the cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation and improvement to be carried out every trimester, rather than every year as is usually the case in other Japanese schools. The principal emphasised flexible situational judgement based on the Observe-Orient-Decide-Act (OODA) loop proposed by John Boyd, with which the school can implement initiatives in a timely manner.

Second, the data were used to facilitate discussions between the stakeholders, including the principal, teachers, students, parents and community members. The participants showed that the principal effectively implements the educational improvement cycle by providing opportunities for teachers and students to set their own goals. For example, one student expressed that she felt that “compassion, perseverance, self-control, and self-confidence” had been developed. In addition, the results of the questionnaire conducted every semester showed a tendency to improve as the semester went on (see Appendix 1; Yada, 2025a). Therefore, it can be understood that students’ non-cognitive skills, such as self-awareness, have been developed. This was a school community goal when the principal was first appointed. The following teacher’s quotation indicated a favourable response to the principal’s continuous data-based analysis, feedback and sharing of the results for the school improvement:

T3: The principal does not just give numbers, but he analyses all of the responses and explains the results to us . . . I think it is meaningful that we continue to do this.

Regarding the responses from outside the school, parents did not give specific views about the questionnaire. However, they mentioned that their children have developed cognitively and emotionally. The following comments were made by community members, who agreed with the principal’s strategy:

CM2: Every semester, teachers review if the students were able to achieve their goals . . . and they have a chance to reflect on what they did . . . At the beginning, there was a lot of anxiety [for us]. But in the end, we are sure that the system was designed to lead them to the next step . . . The principal is working on this system, and that is the driving force.

When the principal explains the progress and results based on the questionnaire, the school staff and the students feel that they are improving. The sense of efficacy and trust that arises from that experience further drives the cycle of educational improvement.

Leadership mix: top-down and bottom-up approaches

The principal’s goals and policies were well understood, although some teachers described his leadership as “forceful”. Due to the short tenure of the principal, there would not be much time for school-wide decision-making from the bottom up, as described below:

Principal: I started the research partner school somewhat forcefully at first, because I didn’t know if I could do it or if it would even come into being if I waited for the limited time I had as a principal. I didn’t have time to waste.

Some teachers also noted that leadership that offers them autonomy does not necessarily result in school improvement since some teachers may not make the necessary effort, potentially leading to maintaining the status quo or even regression:

T4: In my previous school, the principal never told us to do this or that. He would ask, 'What do you want to do?' However, there are pros and cons about that, too. For example, I think that it is easy to cut corners.

The survey results also showed that over 85% of the teachers supported the principal's strong initiative (3–3, 3–4 and 3–5 in Appendix 2; Yada, 2025b). At the same time, however, he has tried to delegate decision-making as much as possible to the teachers themselves so that they could work on their own initiative:

Principal: [At first, it was] top-down, but we try to create a flow where everyone has made decisions and choices together anyway. We are creating bottom-up situations within the organisation . . . we changed the name of the meetings to 'planning and management meetings'.

With regard to decision-making, it was left to the teachers. One teacher said the following:

T1: The principal often discusses with us when the school needs to decide. In that sense, I really feel that he is trying to develop the younger generation while exercising leadership. I think it is an organisation that is comfortable to work in because we have a lot of decision-making opportunities.

In this context, the principal also encouraged teachers to teach and learn from each other so that they could pass on the culture and methods of educational practice to one another:

Principal: I say things like that to the mid-career people and try to develop them . . . and I want the other younger teachers to follow in their footsteps.

For this reason, he provided opportunities for teachers to talk to each other, for example, by offering refreshment to encourage smooth communication among teachers:

Principal: I would buy some goodies and go back to the lounge and say, 'Hi, I bought some food for you', and everyone would gather around. That's where the communication gets going.

Over 75% of the teachers also acknowledged professional growth opportunities in the survey (11–1 in Appendix 2; Yada, 2025b). However, although the teachers can express their opinions to the principal, there are some situations where their opinions are not taken into account. It seems that the teachers are not necessarily able to participate in all decision-making opportunities:

T5: I wonder if it is easy to express your opinions (to the principal). But it is not easy to accept that.

Strategy 3: organising research teams. The principal uses both top-down and bottom-up leadership styles to improve the school. In particular, the principal adopted for the latter is "organising research teams". This aims to build a cooperative support and learning system among teachers in response to Japan's current teacher age imbalance. Teachers are organized into seven research teams of three to four members. Each team selects and conducts research on its own theme. Teachers may change teams or themes during the year and are encouraged to create original themes. Specific themes include, for example, "classroom management to form student relationships", "creating a safe classroom" and "developing students' non-cognitive skills". The principal expects all teachers to participate in a monthly time for reflection. The survey results corroborated the principal's expectation to share issues and collaborate with other teachers to create new ideas, thereby leading to more than 80% of the teachers experiencing their collective efficacy (8–6, 8–7, 8–8 and 13–8 in Appendix 2; Yada, 2025b). When asked about their success, teachers felt they had not yet achieved enough to consider themselves accomplished. This tendency was also seen in the survey, where over 80% of teachers reported almost never or sometimes feeling successful at school (14–2, 14–6 and 14–8 in

Appendix 2; Yada, 2025b). The strategy gathered many comments from the teachers. While some teachers were dissatisfied with the “team system” that is a characteristic of this school, this mechanism is accepted to lead to the development and support of younger teachers:

T6: We have begun to set group goals within the team and regularly review them . . . I have never experienced anything like that kind of organisation before. I think we have a clear idea of what we are doing here. In that respect, this school is different from other schools.

One community member sees the principal’s initiative in a positive light, as follows:

CM3: Since the principal came here . . . I feel that teachers have been more motivated.

Nevertheless, the strategy is still a work in progress. As one parent mentioned about the school’s faculty: “*I feel a huge difference among teachers, and teachers are very uneven.*” This brings up an issue of how difficult it is to develop each teacher’s morale and competence equally.

Strategy 4: open atmosphere for research activity. As mentioned above, the school has been working on inquiry-based learning as the whole school research topic. The strategy is mainly aimed at promoting inquiry-based learning, while it is also effective for intergenerational learning about teaching methods and for improving teachers’ enthusiasm. The Period for Integrated Studies is a subject that encourages students to participate in society on their own initiative by setting social problems and considering how to improve them through research work. Thus, this subject is in line with the school’s educational objectives and is highly relevant to the 17 items of the students’ questionnaire and the development of non-cognitive skills. In the lesson study, the principal made a team of classroom teachers from different grades, where they could formulate and discuss lesson content. In addition, all teachers were required to open their classes to the other teachers and staff. The principal believes that teaching competence is sharpened when the teacher gets feedback. Moreover, the principal recognised the importance of teachers’ interactions outside the school. Therefore, through applying for funding, financial support was also provided to enable teachers to participate in conferences and visit other schools.

Regarding the strategy, many teachers expressed that they feel that teachers’ competence building is being promoted through the strategy:

T4: Since we have many opportunities to show our classes to the public, I think we are definitely acquiring the ability to create good teaching practices . . . The more we do it, the more new ideas we come up with. So, I feel that we (particularly young teachers) are really developing.

Some teachers said it is a positive experience for the students, and that the teachers learn from observing other teachers’ practices when they visit another class. However, there was some dissatisfaction with holding open classes all at once:

T2: I don’t have time to go and see the others’ classes . . . There was an open classroom day for all classes in the fall. But in the end, I was teaching my own class during that time, so I couldn’t see the classes of others . . .

As for academic conferences outside of the school, only those who wish to participate in such activities participate in them. Some motivated teachers commented that it was an opportunity for self-improvement, and they did not seem to feel it was a burden. Community members expressed a positive viewpoint that the principal’s active use of various internal and external academic resources fosters cognitive and non-cognitive skills in the students:

CM1: (The principal) goes to various places . . . to actively participate in various research conferences and give presentations. I think that he is quite active in assigning tasks to the students and gives presentations based on them.

CM3: The fact that there are no truancy cases is probably a reflection of this. I wonder if the school nurtures what people call non-cognitive skills.

The community members understand that promoting inquiry-based learning has fostered the children's non-cognitive abilities in particular, thereby leading to "zero truancy". It is an unprecedented achievement in Japan.

Strategy 5: cooperation with external agencies. The principal introduced the teachers to various experts and administrative staff, such as the local mayor, so that the teachers could invite them to their classrooms. The strategy contributes to promoting inquiry-based learning and reducing teachers' workload. This created opportunities for the students to ask questions to the experts and to share ideas for improving society. The principal explained why he cooperates with external agencies as follows:

Principal: If you don't do things like visiting advanced schools and going to research meetings outside this school, you can't develop your discerning eyes. [A university professor] came to the workshop as an advisor to see the teachers' workshop and discuss how to enhance students' engagement . . . We also ask [the mayor] to look at [the students'] attitude of participating in society.

The strategy was met with some disagreement among the teachers:

T5: We learn a lot by listening to (outside) lecturers . . . The Period for Integrated Studies is a difficult subject because it requires cooperation with outside organisations.

T7: The principal said that he has made an appointment (with an outside lecturer) . . . even though we didn't ask for it. He doesn't give us any support or advice afterwards.

While some teachers were positive, feeling that coordination with external agencies is particularly useful for the conception of inquiry-based learning classes, some felt burdened with the increased workload amid the urgent need for reforms of the way they work. However, there was unanimous agreement on the high level of the principal's caring for the personal lives of the teachers. One teacher mentioned: "*The principal is really kind and listens to us when we ask him about various private matters.*" Community members expressed their admiration for the coordination skills of the principal. Typical examples of his skills that were mentioned include promptly making requests to the Board of Education for necessary items for the school, inviting celebrities as lecturers for visiting classes to encourage interest and participation by parents and local residents, and creating opportunities for local residents to teach children as lecturers. They praised that the school is a place where not only students but also adults can be involved in education.

Discussion

The systematic review by [Sato and Yada \(2023\)](#) pointed out that previous studies have failed to adopt a panoramic perspective that recognises the influence of educational leadership on school success. Addressing this gap, this study highlighted how the principal navigates the school within its cultural and political contexts, as well as how stakeholders perceive the principal's actions. The principal in our case study led school change by making the most of the time constraints of his tenure and the hierarchical context, which resulted in some correspondences and discrepancies in how his leadership practices were perceived by teachers, students, parents and community members. In response to these challenges, he implemented strategies to foster teacher autonomy, such as presenting a clear vision and visualising data to exert leadership for the school's success.

Concerning the research question, three leadership characteristics that lead to the school's success were found. First, the principal continuously introduced his vision through inquiry-based learning, emphasising that education rooted in life experience is important. This value-led approach is consistent with the previous findings ([Day and Gurr, 2013](#)). At the microsystem level, this vision directly influenced teachers and students through daily

interactions and classroom practices. The principal initiated change by introducing research teams and inquiry-based learning, which aims to shift teachers' day-to-day responsibilities with their autonomy. Teachers' shared understanding of this vision fostered a sense of purpose and collaboration, despite challenges such as workload and age imbalance. The lesson study is mainly used for this, which is a hallmark of Japanese teachers' professional development (Lewis *et al.*, 2012). This finding underscores the previous findings that principals need to understand the context well and to initiate leadership interventions in the areas to change (Gurr *et al.*, 2006). However, workload burden, a key issue in the microsystem, affected teachers' stress levels and their ability to fully engage with the principal's initiatives (Kambayashi, 2017). While many teachers embraced the vision, others could struggle due to overwork and limited capacity for innovation.

At the macro level, the principal emphasised inquiry-based learning as a means to nurture students' cognitive and non-cognitive skills, which aligned with his educational vision. The inquiry-based learning is the widely supported democratic approach and educational policy in Japan. The principal mediates the educational policy and his leadership vision. It is worth noting that all the teachers share his vision. Based on this, the response of parents and community members to the principal's vision for the school, educational goals and the principal's identity and values was positive because they agreed with this aspect of the macro system. This represents how the principal aligned his vision with the aspect of the macro system and gained the teachers' empathy (Day and Gurr, 2013), which became a catalyst in leading the school to success.

In the chronological system, Johnson *et al.* (2023) note that the influence of a principal's biography on their leadership remains underexplored. However, this study found that the principal's background in environmental education shaped his leadership practices, particularly through the implementation of inquiry-based learning in real-life experiences.

Second, the principal efficiently identifies issues and makes quick decisions through short cycles of data-driven improvement. Although data-driven school management is called for in response to COVID-19, Sato (2024) points out that school management has been conducted with little evidence. One interesting finding is that the principal acknowledges the fixed term of his appointment as a principal in the school. This indicates that principals adopt their strategies depending on chronological contexts as well. Moreover, the principal takes the data-driven school improvement approach because of the current challenges caused in the macro system surrounding Japanese schools, such as the uneven teachers' age distribution and the differences in enthusiasm for education and research among the teachers. Although some successful principals use data for decision-making, the data serve as a mediator visualising issues and creating a shared vision in this case. However, it is necessary to consider the situation where some teachers try to reduce their burden by following the principal, thereby not fostering teacher autonomy in the hierarchical context. This suggests that if the management were completely left to the initiative of the teachers, some teachers would not be engaged, suggesting that school improvement would not occur.

Third, the principal emphasised a bottom-up approach of school management, although he occasionally utilises a top-down approach to disseminate his vision and to promote his strategies. The principal seems to combine several leadership styles to overcome the constraints of leading a successful school, such as short tenure, teacher age imbalance, and differences in teacher engagement. This suggests his fixed-term appointment as a chronological context may make him take both approaches. Although previous studies have cautioned against relying on a single leadership style (Day and Gurr, 2013), this study found that the principal adopted a mixed leadership style in response to the chronological context. At the mesosystem level, there appears to be an inherent dilemma of the interaction between the principal's intent to encourage teacher autonomy and the implementation of a top-down approach. The principal may try to mitigate the dilemma and overcome the challenges posed by macro systems, such as increased policies and guidelines, which could lead to a sense of burden among teachers. Moreover, by utilising exosystemic resources such as external

agencies and academic conferences, the principal broadened his leadership beyond a top-down approach.

Furthermore, he also incorporated supportive leadership (Xu *et al.*, 2015), such as encouraging collaboration, and leading with emotions, including offering refreshments to facilitate teachers' communication (Day and Gurr, 2013). Teachers fostered their collegiality, leading to them being proactively involved in school leadership endeavours. This corresponds to collaborative and decentralised leadership (Yada and Jäppinen, 2022). It seemed that the principal was careful to gain the understanding of the teachers in order to mitigate the controlling aspects of his leadership at the mesosystem level. Gunnulfson *et al.* (2022) required combining the use of knowledge that draws on sociology and cultural studies to explore successful school leadership. As Triandis (2001) notes, while the Japanese context has a hierarchical structure and a culture of collectivism, it is expected to foster teamwork within the school organisation. The principal promoted teacher collegiality by presenting data and repeatedly communicating a vision and goals that were consistent with national and international educational trends. The principal's approach of involving teachers and encouraging collaboration is different from the top-down management that emphasises responsibility in hierarchical cultures, such as China (Johnson *et al.*, 2008).

These findings have practical implications. First, rather than simply disseminating values, principals should engage staff and stakeholders in co-constructing a shared vision. As part of professional development, principals should thoughtfully explore the role of public education and foster values such as justice and equity, even during short tenures. Such programmes could include modules on value-based leadership and strategies for fostering inclusive school cultures. Principal's vision could be evaluated through periodic surveys. Moreover, discussions about values between the municipal board of education, the current principal and the incoming principal may be important to ensure continuity over time. Second, principals benefit from using data not only for accountability but also as a developmental tool. Although data analysis could be outsourced to boards of education or contracted organisations, professional development programs that support this shift should include content on data literacy, such as interpreting assessment results, identifying trends and linking data to instructional strategies.

Although this study highlights an example that could overcome certain problems in Japan, it has several limitations. First, this study relies on a single case study conducted within a Japan-specific context, which may not fully capture the diversity of experiences or leadership practices across different regions or types of schools. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the data offers only a snapshot of the situation at a particular point in time. It may make it difficult to assess the chronological change of the leadership practices and people's perceptions. Future research could benefit from a broader sample with a longitudinal design to enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings. Third, this study did not address how one of the biggest issues in Japan, teacher overwork, was approached in the school.

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