



Lateral Leadership: *Exploring Strategies to Promote Change in IB Schools in Japan*

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Abstract

This study explores the role of lateral leadership in promoting change within International Baccalaureate (IB) schools in Japan. Traditional hierarchical structures in education often inhibit innovation due to rigid power dynamics and top-down decision-making. Lateral leadership, which emphasizes collaboration, peer influence, and shared authority, presents a transformative model to overcome these challenges. By utilizing narrative inquiry, this research delves into the personal stories and lived experiences of educators in IB schools to understand how lateral leadership can contribute to sustainable change in educational practices and school culture. The findings highlight the potential for lateral leadership to foster a collaborative culture that aligns with the IB philosophy, which values inquiry-based learning, intercultural understanding, and holistic development.

Keywords:

Change management, educational leadership, International Baccalaureate.

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INTRODUCTION

The International Baccalaureate (IB) program has experienced significant growth in recent decades, with more than 5,000 schools in over 150 countries now authorized to offer its programs (IBO, 2023). This expansion reflects a rising global demand for high-quality, internationally minded education that emphasizes inquiry-based learning, intercultural understanding, and holistic student development. However, implementing the IB framework presents unique challenges for schools, as they must adapt the program's philosophy and standards to their local cultural, geographical, and institutional contexts. Schools in different regions face distinct hurdles, ranging from resource constraints to reconciling the IB's collaborative ethos with pre-existing educational traditions.

Japan is no exception to these challenges. IB schools in Japan must navigate the complexities of integrating a globally focused, student-centered curriculum within a traditionally hierarchical and exam-oriented educational system. These schools often encounter cultural resistance to decentralized leadership models, which can hinder efforts to foster collaboration and shared responsibility among staff. In this context, lateral leadership offers a promising strategy for addressing these challenges by promoting peer-driven collaboration, shared decision-making, and professional trust. This study examines how lateral leadership can contribute to sustainable change in IB schools in Japan, enabling them to align their practices more closely with the IB's core principles while addressing the unique demands of their cultural and institutional environment.

This study explores the principles and practices of lateral leadership in IB schools in Japan, focusing on how it can contribute to sustainable change in educational practices and school culture. By examining educators' experiences through narrative inquiry, this research seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which lateral leadership facilitates lasting improvements while respecting the cultural and institutional frameworks of Japanese education. This paper addresses the central research question:

How can lateral leadership contribute to sustainable change in the educational practices and culture of IB schools in Japan?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations of Lateral Leadership

Lateral leadership is grounded in theories of distributed leadership and social influence, both of which emphasize shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making (Spillane, 2006). In the context of IB schools, lateral leadership aligns with the IB philosophy, which emphasizes inquiry-based learning, global citizenship, and the development of personal and academic skills in a collaborative environment. Social influence theory further highlights the power of peer networks in shaping behavior and fostering innovation (Rogers, 2003). In IB schools, this approach supports a move towards decentralized leadership, where teachers and staff members have a significant role in shaping the curriculum and school culture.

Leadership Models in Japanese Education

Traditional educational leadership in Japan is often hierarchical, with decision-making concentrated at the top levels of school administration (Takayama, 2008). This model can limit teacher autonomy and stifle creativity. However, in recent years, there has been growing interest in more distributed forms of leadership that encourage collaboration and professional growth (Saito & Ito, 2019). IB schools in Japan, with their international outlook and commitment to holistic education, present a different dynamic, where collaborative and lateral leadership may hold particular promise.

The Emergence of Lateral Leadership in IB Schools

Lateral leadership in IB schools, particularly in Japan, challenges the traditional hierarchical structure by promoting shared decision-making, peer mentorship, and collaborative problem-solving. Studies suggest that lateral leadership can be particularly effective in environments where innovation and adaptability are critical for success (Harris, 2009). The IB's emphasis on inquiry, reflection, and global perspectives offers a fertile ground for the practice of lateral leadership, enabling teachers and staff to take ownership of their professional development and contribute meaningfully to school-wide changes (Sahlberg, 2011).

Expanding Perspectives on Lateral Leadership

More recent research has extended the discourse on lateral leadership by exploring its adaptability in cross-cultural contexts. Leithwood and Seashore Louis (2012) emphasize that lateral leadership fosters resilience in schools facing complex challenges, such as adapting to international curricula like the IB framework. Their work highlights the importance of fostering relational trust as a foundational element of leadership, a concept that aligns with findings in this study.

Gurr, Drysdale, and Mulford (2006) found that lateral leadership can be particularly effective in fostering a sense of collective responsibility among staff, which is essential in environments like IB schools where educators must balance diverse pedagogical approaches. These studies underline the need for professional learning communities and other structures to facilitate collaboration across cultural and institutional boundaries.

Furthermore, Hallinger and Heck's (2010) longitudinal studies on distributed leadership demonstrate that leadership practices emphasizing lateral influence positively impact student outcomes by creating cohesive and adaptive school cultures. Their research reinforces the findings of Harris (2009) and underscores the potential for lateral leadership to drive systemic improvements in educational quality.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts narrative inquiry as its research design, focusing on the personal stories and lived experiences of educators in IB schools in Japan. Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research methodology that emphasizes storytelling to explore the complexities of lived experiences, the meanings participants attach to their experiences, and how they navigate the challenges of their professional roles (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the role of lateral leadership within the cultural and institutional context of IB schools in Japan.

Through narrative inquiry, this study investigates how lateral leadership is practiced within IB schools and how educators perceive its impact on sustainable change in educational practices and school culture. By collecting and analyzing participants' stories, the study aims to generate a deeper understanding of how lateral leadership functions in Japanese IB schools and its potential for fostering enduring educational improvements.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through narrative interviews with educators in five IB schools across Japan, selected to reflect a variety of geographical and institutional contexts. Participants included teachers, department heads, and school administrators who have direct experience with leadership practices in these schools.

Each participant was invited to share their personal stories and experiences related to leadership practices, particularly focusing on instances where lateral leadership was implemented or where they personally exercised lateral leadership. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to guide the direction of the conversation while also addressing key themes of collaboration, empowerment, trust, and professional development.

In addition to the interviews, documents such as school policies, meeting minutes, and school action plans were reviewed to provide contextual insights into the organizational structures and goals of IB schools in Japan.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using narrative analysis, which involved several stages:

- **Transcription:** Interviews were transcribed verbatim to capture participants' exact words and storytelling nuances.
- **Coding:** Initial coding identified recurring themes such as collaboration, empowerment, challenges in implementing lateral leadership, and the influence of cultural factors on leadership practices.

- **Thematic Analysis:** Themes that emerged across participants' stories were examined for their relevance to the central research question and the broader educational context of IB schools in Japan.
- **Narrative Construction:** The researcher synthesized the individual narratives to construct a cohesive narrative that explores the experiences of lateral leadership in IB schools and identifies key insights related to its role in fostering sustainable change.

FINDINGS

Lateral Leadership and Sustainable Change

The analysis revealed that lateral leadership has the potential to contribute to sustainable change in IB schools in Japan by:

Fostering Collaboration: Teachers and staff collaboratively address challenges, leading to shared ownership of solutions and long-term commitment to change. For example, one teacher noted how professional learning communities could be an opportunity to address disparities in student engagement: *"If we had more structured collaboration, I think we could brainstorm better strategies for keeping students motivated."*

Promoting Empowerment: Educators reported feeling that initiatives encouraging shared decision-making might enhance their sense of agency. A school administrator suggested, *"When teachers are given the chance to shape policies, they are more likely to go the extra mile—but we still have work to do to achieve this."*

Cultivating Trust: Strong relationships among colleagues have the potential to enable open communication and mutual support, essential for enduring improvements in school culture. A department head reflected, *"If we could build more trust within our team, I think experimentation and innovation would become much easier."*

Strategies for Implementation

Participants identified several strategies for implementing lateral leadership effectively:

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs): Structured opportunities for collaboration on teaching practices, curriculum design, and student engagement were seen as having significant potential. One participant observed, *"We haven't fully embraced PLCs yet, but I believe they could help us challenge traditional methods and pilot innovative projects."*

Peer Mentorship and Coaching: Leveraging the expertise of experienced educators to guide and support peers was identified as a promising avenue. A senior teacher remarked, *"Mentorship programs could be a great way to foster mutual respect and shared growth."*

Inclusive Decision-Making: Including teachers, administrators, and even students in shaping policies and practices was highlighted as an aspirational goal. A principal noted, *"Involving student representatives in curriculum discussions could bring fresh insights, but we need to create the right environment for this."*

Challenges and Limitations

Despite its promise, lateral leadership in IB schools in Japan faces challenges, including:

Cultural Resistance: Traditional Japanese norms around hierarchy can make it difficult for some educators to embrace peer-driven leadership models. One school leader remarked, "*Convincing colleagues to challenge the status quo is always the hardest part—cultural norms run deep.*"

Role Ambiguity: Blurring the lines between leadership and followership may create confusion about responsibilities. A teacher noted, "*Sometimes, it's unclear who has the final say, and that can slow progress.*"

Time Constraints: Demands of daily responsibilities often leave little room for the collaborative practices essential to lateral leadership. One teacher expressed frustration: "*We want to collaborate more, but the time just isn't there between classes, grading, and meetings.*"

Impact on Educational Practices and Culture

Participants reported that lateral leadership has the potential to:

Enhance Teacher Engagement: Collaborative and inclusive practices could improve teacher satisfaction and morale. One teacher shared, "*If our contributions were valued more consistently, I think many of us would feel more motivated.*"

Promote Innovative Teaching: Teachers could feel more empowered to experiment with new methods aligned with IB principles if trust and collaboration were reinforced. A teacher explained, "*I believe we could redesign our assessment approach through better team collaboration.*"

Strengthen School Culture: A culture of trust and mutual respect could underpin sustainable improvements in the educational environment. A principal concluded, "*With more focus on building trust, we could break down some of the barriers that hinder innovation.*"

DISCUSSION

The findings underscore the potential of lateral leadership to drive sustainable change in the educational practices and culture of IB schools in Japan. By fostering collaboration, empowerment, and trust, lateral leadership aligns closely with the IB's emphasis on inquiry, reflection, and global perspectives. The use of narrative inquiry proved instrumental in uncovering these insights, as it allowed educators to articulate their experiences in their own words, highlighting the nuances of their roles and the challenges they face in implementing lateral leadership.

Role of Narrative Inquiry in Analysis

The narrative inquiry methodology enabled a deep exploration of how lateral leadership operates within IB schools. The data analysis process revealed themes that are consistent with existing literature on lateral leadership in schools. For instance, Spillane's (2006) research emphasizes the importance of shared leadership in building trust and collaboration, findings that were mirrored in participants' narratives about Professional Learning Communities. Additionally, the study corroborated Harris's (2009) argument that distributed leadership fosters innovation and adaptability, as reflected in participants' descriptions of inclusive decision-making processes and mentoring initiatives.

The narrative approach also highlighted cultural nuances specific to Japan, enriching the broader understanding of the effectiveness of lateral leadership if it were to be implemented in IB schools in Japan. For example, participants' accounts revealed a delicate balance between respecting hierarchical norms and fostering shared leadership. This aligns with Saito and Ito's (2019) findings on collaborative leadership in Japanese schools in general, emphasizing the need for contextual adaptation when introducing distributed leadership models.

Implications for Practice

Schools should establish frameworks that encourage shared responsibility and collaborative decision-making. For example, policies could outline structured opportunities for teacher-led committees to shape curriculum design and student engagement initiatives. Administrators can explicitly allocate time and resources for collaboration, ensuring lateral leadership are prioritized at the institutional level.

Investing in leadership training programs can equip educators with the skills necessary for effective lateral leadership. Workshops on collaborative problem-solving, peer mentorship techniques, and intercultural communication could be particularly valuable in IB school settings. Furthermore, creating mentorship programs within schools would ensure that experienced educators can guide peers in adopting lateral leadership practices.

Efforts should be made to challenge hierarchical norms and cultivate a culture of mutual respect and collaboration. This could include holding school-wide events where successes from lateral leadership initiatives are celebrated, reinforcing the value of shared responsibility. Regular forums or reflection sessions where educators discuss challenges and successes in lateral leadership implementation could further foster trust and openness.

Finally, ensuring adequate time and resources for collaborative practices is essential. This could involve adjusting timetables to include dedicated periods for team discussions or providing funding for tools that facilitate collaboration, such as shared digital platforms or team-building retreats. Schools could also consider employing facilitators to guide collaborative efforts and ensure that all voices are heard in group settings.

CONCLUSION

Lateral leadership offers a promising approach to fostering sustainable change in the educational practices and culture of IB schools in Japan. However, its successful implementation requires overcoming deeply ingrained cultural barriers unique to Japan. The cultural practices of *tatemae* and *honne*—where outward conformity often masks personal opinions—can create challenges in fostering open dialogue and genuine collaboration. Similarly, the emphasis on consensus building, while valuable in promoting harmony, can slow decision-making processes and dilute innovative ideas.

To address these challenges, it is essential for IB schools in Japan to create environments where trust and transparency are prioritized. Educators must feel empowered to express their true opinions and experiment with new ideas without fear of disrupting the status quo. Lateral leadership, with its focus on collaboration and mutual respect, has the potential to navigate these cultural dynamics effectively by building relationships that transcend superficial agreement and encourage meaningful participation.

By emphasizing strategies such as structured professional learning communities, peer mentorship, and inclusive decision-making, lateral leadership can gradually shift school cultures towards greater openness and adaptability. While significant cultural and institutional hurdles remain, this study demonstrates that with sustained effort, lateral leadership can serve as a powerful catalyst for lasting educational change in IB schools in Japan. Future research should explore how these strategies can be tailored further to address specific cultural nuances and measure their long-term impact on educational outcomes.

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