



Relational vs. Cultural Leadership: What Is Needed to Successfully Lead in an IB Authorized School in Japan?

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Abstract

This ethnographic study investigates the leadership dynamics involved in implementing the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme (MYP) in a Japanese Article 1 school. Drawing on structured field interactions with members of the leadership team, the research explores how relational and cultural leadership capacities intersect to influence school reform. Findings reveal that relational leadership is essential for cultivating trust and voluntary engagement, while cultural leadership is necessary for aligning global pedagogical frameworks with local traditions. The study contributes to a growing body of literature that positions leadership as a culturally contingent and relationally embedded practice in international schooling contexts.

Keywords:

International Baccalaureate, relational leadership, cultural leadership, school reform, ethnography.

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Introduction

The International Baccalaureate (IB) is an internationally orientated educational process with a focus on inquiry, reflection and intercultural communication. But when it is transplanted to a local system, especially one imbued with rich cultural and historical context, resistance or misalignment can be common (Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996; Walker & Dimmock, 2000). This ethnographic investigation looks at the way leadership processes



mediate this cultural experience at a Japanese Article 1 school with the MYP intervention: specifically the IB Middle Years Programme. In Japan, Article 1 educational institutions are publicly recognized under the School Education Law and are the main providers of education from kindergarten through secondary level. These schools are entrenched within national frameworks of education and are mandated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) to follow the curriculum. Hence, external frameworks such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), which emphasize global citizenship, student agency and interdisciplinary learning, can be seen as both culturally incongruous and administratively burdensome.

The leadership in these institutions is, for the most part, hierarchical and bureaucratic. Principals and vice-principals tend to function in organizations where the emphasis is more on administrative hierarchy and obedience to procedure (Sugimoto, 2010) as opposed to pedagogical exploration. Although this format has been useful at times for preserving institutional stability, it fails in contexts where change needs to be adaptive, collaborative, and change-building (Fullan 2001). Resistance to change particularly with respect to foreign education models frequently speaks to longstanding cultural responses that strive to protect collective identity, institutional legacy, and professional autonomy. In international school reform, context-sensitive leadership-based approaches are more and more focused in the literature. Two styles are of particular interest: relational leadership, which emphasizes trust-building, empathy, and emotional labor; and cultural leadership, which refers to the processes involving understanding and integrating local values and global pedagogical needs (Shields, 2010; Lumby & Foskett, 2009). This article investigates the expression of such forms in a Japanese Article 1 school as it adopts MYP by asking: What type of leadership relational versus cultural is required, in order to lead an IB authorized school in Japan successfully?

Methodology

Research Design and Site

The selected approach for this study is a qualitative ethnographic methodology, selected for its capacity to reveal meanings and practices underpinning social action in culturally complex environments (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Emerson et al., 2011). Ethnography helps researchers to view leadership as not merely abstract, but an embodied endeavor influenced by local histories, institutional cultures, and interpersonal relations. Fieldwork was collected over a period of eight months, consisting of structured site visits and online interviews, at a school which has been engaged in the IB continuum for several years. The school is a PYP and MYP authorized Article 1 private school serving approximately 800 students from kindergarten through upper secondary levels.

Data Collection

The primary interlocutor was a mid-level leadership team member of the school (hereinafter referred to as Leader), who served as a liaison between teaching faculty and senior leadership. He holds a coordination role for MYP implementation and is responsible for professional development, curriculum alignment, and staff engagement. Data were collected through in-person and online meetings, fieldnotes, informal conversations and

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document analysis. Meeting length ranged from 60 to 90 minutes and centered on leadership responses to MYP-related issues such as professional development, teacher buy-in, and organizational cultures. Special attention was given to body language, tone and linguistic framing in interactions according to interpretive ethnographic principles. Included were staff meeting agendas, professional development notes, internal documents, and guides for curriculum development.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed according to grounded theory-based methods (open and axial coding) (Charmaz, 2006). Memos were collected following each field visit to uncover emerging themes, contradictions and theoretical categories. In the beginning, the codes were relational vulnerability, symbolic compliance, teacher disengagement and cultural framing of reform. These were categorized through a series of iterative coding cycles into broader analytical concepts, corresponding to the relational and cultural dimensions of leadership.

The coding and interpretation process was reflexive, and findings were triangulated through member checks and the inclusion of multiple data types. Preliminary interpretations were shared with leadership team members (in subsequent interactions), allowing them to verify, elucidate, or challenge emerging themes. Through this dialogical approach, the credibility and depth of the analysis was further enhanced.

Ethical Considerations and Positionality

Ethical considerations were paramount in such cases. Anonymity was maintained by the school and all participants, and consent was taken after written information was obtained before data sampling. Consent and anonymity were communicated to the students; students were also notified of their ability to withdraw at any time and provided with opportunities to read transcripts and field notes.

As a researcher a reflexive stance was taken throughout, with the acknowledgement of the situated positioning as a cultural outsider, as well as an educational insider with knowledge and experience in IB frameworks. This dual positioning provided both distance from an analysis perspective and practical insight, though it also required a degree of sensitivity to the power dynamics in the school as well as cultural assumptions that could potentially shape the interpretation.

Findings

The findings are presented thematically to capture the two dominant aspects of leadership that developed from the data, relational leadership, and cultural leadership. Both sections contain an analysis and interpretation of ethnographic vignettes to illustrate how the leadership was experienced in practice and how it influenced the implementation process.

Relational Leadership: Building Trust Amid Resistance

Approaches of relational leadership were key in efforts to address passive and subversive resistance to teaching staff. In one of the on-site visits the Leader shared how he engaged these hesitant faculty members:

Rather than pushing, I try to gently offer possibilities. Perhaps I might say, 'If you're interested, would you like to explore this approach?' or 'Please let me know if I can be of any help.' Through small actions and patience I try to show that there is support available whenever needed, and that this is a comfortable space for everyone.

This focus on invitation instead of imposition is a considered relational choice. The Leader's model of minimizing emotional defenses and establishing trust in relationship, which is in line with research reporting high levels of affective dimensions in leadership (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Noddings, 2005). He provided tailored assistance, co-teaching lesson planning and individual consults to minimize perceived top-down instructions. But the efforts were often underwritten by a lack of senior leadership.

However, these efforts frequently lacked support from the senior leadership. During one meeting, the Leader expressed frustration:

Maybe it's just my perception, but we all feel ... a little alone in these efforts. Our principal is always very encouraging — which we appreciate — and very receptive to suggestions. But it seems like implementation has its own hurdles. When staff members witness this trend, they may quietly wonder whether their efforts will lead to real change. It's natural, isn't it? They look upward for signals before committing themselves completely. This isn't criticism, of course — it's just how things are when the connection between decisions and actions becomes... somewhat unclear.

This point reveals a crucial shortcoming of relational leadership in isolation. Without the structural underpinnings and institutional underpinnings that ensure relational efforts are not viewed as optional or overly reliant upon personal charisma. Trust-building struck a chord in opening up a discussion, but it could not carry behavioral change through if it lacked larger institutional alignment.

Cultural Leadership: Aligning Reform with Tradition

Cultural leadership filled this philosophical chasm between the IB's inquiry-based nature and its school's tradition bound character. Leaders relied on culturally appropriate metaphors and values, translating global phrases into locally specific stories. This integrative approach facilitated incremental uptake of IB practices and demonstrated the capacity for adaptive leadership in culturally conservative contexts (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Sakamoto, 2006).

One instance that was shared was during a recent staff professional development session. The Leader rooted the MYP's emphasis on student reflection in the Japanese idea of *hansei* (introspection). He explained:

In some ways, these practices are not entirely new to us. We've always encouraged students to reflect on their learning and consider their growth—this has been part of our approach for quite some time. Perhaps what the IB framework offers is... a more structured way to make these existing practices

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clearer and more consistent. So it feels less like adopting something foreign and more like... refining what we already value, if that makes sense..

This cultural reframing helped staff recognize continuity between IB goals and already-existing pedagogical sensibilities, and as a result mitigating fears of potential cultural erosion. The Leader also connected the IB's commitment to rigorous academic work with the long-held tradition of *gakuryoku* (academic diligence), and said he believes the MYP is a continuation, not a repudiation of, Japanese educational values. But not all faculty members accepted these framings. Some were less confident that the IB had any implications for their professional identity or local educational context. Several teachers expressed their nervousness about the IB's dilution of a school so different in its character in informal conversations:

The methods we've developed over the years have been carefully refined, and it has worked. Much wisdom has been passed down to us. Why is there a need to adjust what has been working?

Cultural leadership worked to decrease symbolic threat but was limited when institutional narratives made innovation and tradition appear mutually exclusive. The problem here was not simply semantic rather structural: the entrenched assumptions about the purpose and identity of education, combined with deep-seated assumptions about the institution's purpose and school identity, precluded a cultural transformation from changing institutional structures; as the first sign was, the second was less a question of mere semantics, as people had settled to think of it.

Hierarchies and Symbolic Compliance

This was a symbolic compliance culture with a hierarchy of formal hierarchies and indirect ways of communicating. Senior leaders attended IB-related meetings with an apparent endorsement of reforms but their body language and little verbal engagement suggested ambivalence. This was an expression of larger cultural norms in which *tatemae* (surface agreement) prevailed over *honne* (authentic belief) in a world of work (Sugimoto, 2010; Rohlen, 1991).

The Leader evoked this dynamic:

Our principal is always encouraging—'yes, yes, good idea'—which we appreciate. However, the follow-through sometimes becomes... unclear. When colleagues observe this pattern, they may quietly question the true priority of these initiatives. Naturally, people's motivation reflects what they see from leadership.

That sort of performative support sabotaged implementation efforts because it communicated that IB engagement was not an overarching institutional priority. Faculty too often viewed IB-related tasks as auxiliary or even optional. At middle leadership level, there often was very little to no support and structures for achieving common objectives. This experience confirmed that even if relational or cultural strategies are articulately discussed,

they also need to be in accord with hierarchical structures, to prevent fragmentation and reform fatigue.

Institutionalizing non-participation

As time went on, failing to participate in IB activities like planning and the like such as when they took part in a meeting, the weekly survey, or professional learning sessions just became part of life for many. Lack of accountability and inconsistent school-leadership messaging contributed to this institutional momentum reinforced an institutional inertia. Teachers felt that professional development sessions were ambiguous or unrelated to their specific subjects and that they were not penalized for failing to participate in the reform attempts.

One teacher explained:

Recently, I've found myself attending those meetings less frequently. The outcomes haven't always been clear, and it doesn't seem my presence really matters anyway. So I'm wondering whether my time might be better spent on other responsibilities.

This pattern of disengagement underscores the self-reinforcing power over and underlines the pattern of institutional norms (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In the absence of changes in expectations from those in positions of power, leadership efforts to overcome this norm through persuasion or voluntary participation had little effect. The results point out that effective reform isn't just a matter of having leadership in place, but of the culture of organizations being transformed where participation is not only anticipated but actively encouraged.

Discussion

This study indicates the subtle interplay of relational and cultural leadership in the implementation of IB within a Japanese Article 1 school. The ethnographic details show that neither answer works in isolation. Rather, effective leadership in this environment demands an integrated model that is built on relational leadership emotional insight with cultural leadership semantic framing, as well as explicitly articulated strategic direction.

The Promise and Limits of Relational Leadership

Relational leadership led to a significant level of trust in interpersonal relationships between leaders and followers, and the fear of perceived threats to them resulting from change was minimized. It provided psychological safety and it facilitated reform in the absence of intense pressure. With his invitation, empathy, and personalized support style, the Leader established spaces in which teachers felt heard and valued.

Yet the critical efficacy of relational leadership empathy and consensus-building curtailed its transformative power, unless supported by institutional mandates. In the absence of sustained support from senior leaders, relational efforts were likely to be seen as optional and perhaps too reliant on personal charisma (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Louis et al., 2010).

Teachers waited for orders from above while they sought to ‘change’ and in such an environment relational work was not adequate for systemic change.

The Promise and Limits of Cultural Leadership

The impact of cultural leadership lent itself to a strong interpretive toolset for reform in terms consistent with the school’s orientation. It enabled administrators to frame IB as an extension (rather than as a rejection) of local traditions – essential in an environment where educational identity is closely entwined with historical continuity and the pride of the school itself. Relating IB concepts to values associated within Japan such as *hansei* or *gakuryoku*, cultural leaders eliminated ideological resistance and facilitated a means of engagement.

Yet such cultural leadership may be slow to affect systemic changes, and it might even inadvertently help maintain the status quo by prioritizing symbolic harmony over substantive change (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Lumby & Foskett, 2009). While cultural reframing is important, it fails to engage structural obstacles to change when institutional narratives treat innovativeness and tradition as mutually exclusive. This means that the difficulty will not only be to translate the concepts but to reformulate, as well, the underlying assumptions under which institutional practices exist.

Toward an Integrated Leadership Model

The results indicate that a balanced model of leadership is necessary. The effective form of leadership in Japanese Article 1 schools implementing IB programmes should emphasize both relational attention and cultural proficiency, while anchored on a specific well-articulated strategic vision. This is realized by combining the emotional resonance of relational leadership through the semantic framing of cultural leadership, together with a coordinated institutional strategy which makes messaging consistent at all levels of leadership (Spillane, 2006; Shields, 2010).

This kind of balance can be realized through distributed leadership teams in which mid-level reformers are empowered & supported visibly by senior leadership. Professional development needs to be carefully designed to reinforce values that align with the community, and co-construction of goals, and to build bottom-up engagement and top-down legitimation. Crucially, both relational and cultural leadership should be positioned within a structure of clear expectancies, monitoring systems, and continuing dialogic practice.

In this way, relational and cultural leadership approaches, when strategically combined, have the potential to transform IB implementation in Japanese schools from a compliance-driven obligation to a contextually meaningful evolution of practice.

Conclusion

Japanese IB school leadership cannot be reduced to policy implementation or process control. It has to be conceptualized as a situated practice which is rooted in culture and relation. The ethnographic experience at the Japanese Article 1 School reveals that leadership must be responsive to our emotional realities as human beings, attuned to local values and concerned with the creation of collective meaning. The ethnographic experience at the Japanese Article 1 School underscores the need for leadership approaches that are sensitive to local values, responsive to emotional realities, and oriented toward collective meaning-making. This study concludes that relational and cultural leadership approaches, when deployed in isolation, offer important but limited tools for navigating educational reform in culturally conservative environments.

Relational leadership nurtures trust and safety of emotions among colleagues so faculty can engage without fear of reprisal. Cultural leadership bridges ideological chasms so that global agendas (i.e., the International Baccalaureate) have a better relationship with historical values deeply rooted within Japan's educational culture. The study concludes that a lack of strategic alignment and institutional coherence can undermine even the most well-intentioned leadership efforts.

For leadership in Japanese Article 1 schools to become meaningful, it needs to be affective and interpretive in nature able to involve people emotionally, but also to recast the public narrative of reform in culturally appropriate ways. Simultaneously, these are systems which need to provide a continuation of legitimacy and clear expectations. This balance requires an integrated leadership system that shares responsibility throughout layers of hierarchy creates strategic vision, and facilitates a reflective culture within the organization.

It may be interesting in the future to investigate the transferability of these findings from one context to another or to other IB programmes (PYP, DP, CP), to see whether these findings can be generalizable to different regions of Japan or other parts of the world. The interplay with leadership outcomes and leadership effectiveness might be enhanced by comparing case to case studies, especially how national policy, school governance, and community engagement relate to each other. The practical implications of the findings are that, in order to enable leadership to thrive in IB schools, that leadership should go beyond the 'how-to' aspect and be infused with considerations of intercultural competencies, emotional literacy, and institutional change management.

Ultimately, leading an IB school in Japan is not merely a technical challenge it is a relational and cultural act of translation. Leaders must be more than administrators, they must also be bridge-builders, storytellers, and custodians, guiding their communities through complex educational transformations grounded in mutual respect and shared purpose.

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