

## **FINDING ALTERNATIVES AND/OR FOLLOWING GLOBAL TRENDS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS?: REFLECTION OF EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT IN JAPAN**

Hiroki Suematsu and Kemma Tsujino

Tokyo Gakugei University, Tokyo, Japan & Osaka City University, Osaka, Japan

**Abstract:** *As difficult situations around educational management increase, related research needs to be reflected upon. In this research, the actual nature of the school management process is examined by questioning “How is a headteacher able to impact and effect the school?” and “What kind of relationships are there among various people who are involved?” using the fieldwork at the R school alliance (consisting of four primary schools and one lower secondary school) since 2013 in Japan. As a result, it is shown that the following phases are needed to be considered—various intentions and people within/outside the school; rotation system as the personnel affairs; careful mutual-understanding with educational administration to overcome the “top-down” approach; and sharp insights into social changes. It implies that even under a uniform system the reality of school management is very diverse, and the possible ways for the corresponding school management are particularly context-dependent. So even the simple technical theories can become harmful. Therefore, dialogue between school leaders and researchers is essential to find alternatives and/or follow global trends while understanding the complexity of school management in relation with the meso/macro contexts such as community conditions and educational policies.*

**Key words:** school leader, reality of school management, educational reform, Japan

### **Introduction: Lack of Reality for “School Leader” Studies**

Educational management is confronted with more complex contexts and environments in the rapidly changing society. So-called neo-liberal reforms that have a clear trend towards the decentralization of services within a framework of increasingly detailed target-setting and monitoring by central government have been implemented in different countries, and this implementation has schools thrown into more competitive situations with a lack of resources (Whitty, 2008; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). In such global trends, the nature of school management should be questioned again. University researchers are also involved in the field of educational management. However, as the trends of academic research, which strongly require effectiveness, have increased, it seems that the unreasonable technical approaches or

standardised theories without consideration of diverse characteristics of schools are abundant.

The “apparent popularity of education management texts... is harmful because of the way it fails to challenge existing social inequalities and the way it chimes with managerialist policies that will only further intensify existing inequity” (Thrupp & Willmott, 2003, p. 3). As the difficulties around educational management increases, the way of related research used should be questioned. What role can university researchers play here?

### **Aims and Objectives**

#### **Raising Questions from Japan**

There is a certain gap between what school leaders say and what they actually think and do. Under/against the political mainstream,

therefore, “grass-rooted” dialogue between school leaders and researchers are conducted to find alternatives and/or follow global trends.

In this research, the “school leader” is defined in a wider meaning than a headteacher (principal); it includes teachers and other staff who are trying to bring about positive movement to their school. The fieldwork targets mainly headteachers in Japan with different careers, and other voices are taken into consideration at the same time. Although it is often said that the feature of school reform process in Japan is characterised as policy-led and top-down, the reality is clarified to be much more complex and dynamic through this research.

The outcome of this research describes such actual situations through the continual dialogue between school leaders and researchers. Instead of suggesting how-to methods, the authors are focusing on the dialogue in order to understand the situation in detail. The authors are focusing on the continuous dialogue and have been doing the fieldwork from 2013 until 2017.

At the conclusion, what situations school leaders are facing and how they consider it in the local context of their schools is clarified. The meaning of the cases in a global context is also described at the same time. There is much more potential than people think for educational management if school leaders and researchers meet and reflect with each other.

### **Global Trends of School Leader Research**

School management is now in a very complex context and environment and still has many problems that strongly remain a policy-led and top-down approach. However, school management is rarely democratic or sustainable if it does not have its autonomy and is not based on its local context. The process of school management should not be a top-down or policy-led approach but should face and consider the

local context and how the stakeholders of the school think.

Therefore, in this research, to clarify and re-define the role of the school leader, the actual nature of school management process in such complicated and contradictory environments is examined by mainly focusing on headteachers with the question “How is a headteacher actually able to impact and affect the school?” For the approach to the reality of school management, “What kind of relationships are there among various voices that are involved in the actual process to improve the school?”

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

**Ambiguity of the school leader and its implications.** Through questioning “Who are the school leaders?” the ambiguity of the concept of school leader has been pointed out (Tsuji & Suematsu, 2016) and is becoming very significant. As other researchers have pointed out, “There is no clearly defined, specific ‘role’ of school leadership, but at best a coloured patchwork of many different aspects” (Huber, 2004, p. 5), and “The terms educational leader, manager, and administrator are used quite differently from nation to nation” (Hallinger, 2003, p. 4). Though “leadership is a highly contested concept” (Lumby, Walker, Gryant, Bush, & Björk, 2009, p. 157), it implies not only just a complicated concept but also meaningful one to discuss. “Our view in relation to school leadership views the field of influence as wider, not just contributing to the effectiveness of the organization, but also directly interacting with and contributing to the community” (Lumby et al., 2009, p. 157).

While we cannot clearly define school leader, we need to think deliberately about who are the people able to make a good school. We could engage with these questions diversely and controversially.

As Bush (2011) argued, there are some types of models of leadership in education. Our research framework is rather applied to the political models of leadership because they “assume that organizations are political arenas whose members engage in political activity in pursuit of their interests. Analysis focuses on the distribution of power and influence in organizations and on the bargaining and negotiation between interest groups” (Bush, 2011, p. 99).

**Importance of comparative perspective and governance structure.** What is often overlooked is the question “What are the limitations that schools cannot improve as a single unit organisation?” One of the main themes of this research – “Is a headteacher a real school leader?” – implies the significance on focusing on the overall structure of the public education system beyond a school as a unit. However, the feature of the whole system surrounding the school is often overlooked, because the object ‘school’ is too familiar to people (Tsujino & Suematsu, 2016). In this research we are targeting Japan, but in the background, there is a foundation of international comparative research which the authors have done so far. It is said that through comparative education, we can not only make “strange patterns familiar” in foreign countries, but also make “familiar patterns strange” in one’s own country (Bray, 1999).

**Approach to the Reality of School Management – A Case of "R School Alliance"**

**Understanding School Management in a Real Way**

What does it mean to understand school management in a real way? Not only headteachers and teachers, but also various others such as administrative staff, nursing teachers, and nutrition staff work at schools in

Japan. In addition, there are some staff such as school counsellors, school social workers, community coordinators who are employed to work inside and outside schools. Also, in the case of Japan, there are the various relationships between a school and its local community which cannot be ignored. People on the outside of school play big roles (see Figure 1).

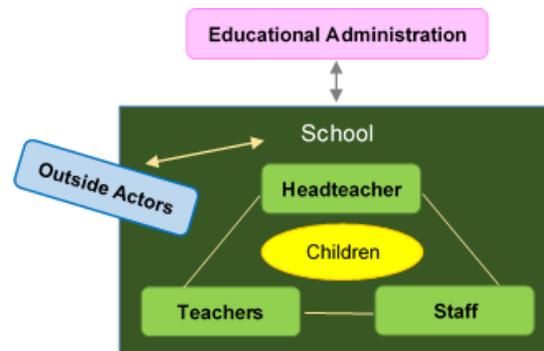


Figure 1. Graphic depicting the various actors inside & outside a school. Drawn by the authors.

That is why we are also targeting various players in education in relation with the macro policy and system: to understand school management in a real way. Furthermore, considering that a school does not have much authority, educational administrative institutions often influence the reality of school management in different ways (for further detail of preconditions for school management, see Tsujino & Suematsu, 2016, and Appendix 1 & 2).

In Japan, all school staff members, including the headteacher, move from one school to another school every few years and sometimes move into educational administration (the rotation system in the personnel affairs). It is probable that almost every Japanese headteacher takes over school management issues left by the predecessor at the time of her/his arrival at the new school. The prefectural education board which is located between the state and the municipality (cities) is authoritative about this rotation system.

### Basic Information of R School Alliance

As follows, we are dealing with a case of the R school alliance in which the authors have been continuously taking part in since July 2013 until March 2017. The R school alliance consists of four primary schools and one lower secondary school. The school choice system does not exist in this city, and there are no competitive surroundings for these schools. Collaboration for management among the five schools has been done for ca. 10 years. R school alliance sets the school alliance management board consisting of representatives of committees from all five school management boards (see Figure 2).

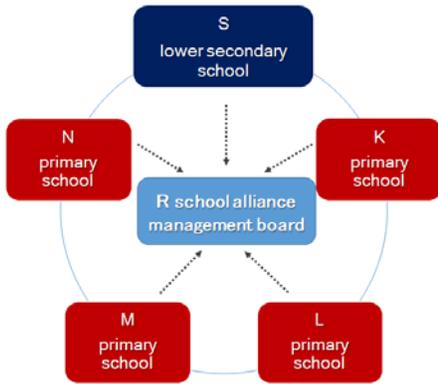


Figure 2. Graphic depicting the structure of R school alliance as drawn by the authors.

In general, the reality of school management is influenced from various factors: whether the school is small in scale or large; whether the school is in an urban area or a rural one; how much cooperation exists between the school and its local communities including the parents; whether the school’s teachers and other staff are cooperative or not; and whether the municipal board of education which is responsible for the school is supportive or authoritative. The four primary schools that constitute the R school alliance vary from small schools of dozens of children to large-scale schools of more than 800, and the situation in each area are diverse from large residential areas to small traditional villages. By focusing on the R school alliance,

implications are to be obtained to approach the reality of school management from various angles.

### Results

#### Key Issues that Symbolise the Reality of Each School

The method of this research is not a one-shot interview, but it is based on formal and informal continuous interviews and observations since 29 July 2013. All data were analysed depending on the authors’ field notes, so the remarks were simplified. All job positions of the interviewees are those at the time of the interview.

Most children attending the primary schools in the R school alliance enroll into the S lower secondary school. The headteacher B of the S lower secondary school talked about the characteristics of this school: that the financial support from community members is extraordinary in comparison to other schools; that local people are friendly and cooperative towards the school; and that “children with difficulties” keep coming to school instead of leaving, etc. (10 October 2013 interview). Inside the Q city, S lower secondary school is rumoured as one of the most “difficult” schools; however, by observing the actual situation, it is obvious how such labelling is in contradiction to the reality.

In general, inside the so-called “difficult” school, top-down instruction is often seen as suppressive; however, the S lower secondary school has a relatively soft educational climate. As a result, the teachers who have arrived at this school from another school are sometimes confused about the differences. C teacher, who is in the second year at this school, said, “In the first year, I struggled because my way of instruction did not fit, so gradually I had to change my style. After communicating with the children, now little by little I feel some response from children” (31 July 2015 interview).

The headteacher A of the K primary school with over 800 children, which is the largest in scale in the R school alliance, critically referred to the former school management of K primary school soon after he arrived at this school (10 October 2013). His point of view about the former style of “academic achievement” was that it was often simplified by the test scores in Japanese language and mathematics. After his arrival he decided to change the emphasis to a rich and warm “mind” instead of academic achievement. Before working as a headteacher for K primary school, he worked at the Q City Board of Education as a supervisor mainly dealing with the “community school” policy of the city. Therefore, he is very familiar with the educational policy of the Q city, and what actions are necessary for a school to effectively cooperate with the board of education. On the contrary, the more a headteacher becomes familiar with the administration, the gap between the teachers without experience in administration arises further. It makes it harder for him when he manages the school as an organisation.

To know what various educators think about the schools and how their images are connected or divergent with each other, let us look at the school evaluation as a concrete example which has been discussed by various people at the school management board. A headteacher, a vice headteacher, teacher(s), community members, and parents participate in the school management board (see Figure 3). Many of the community members were/are parents who let their children go to schools in this area.

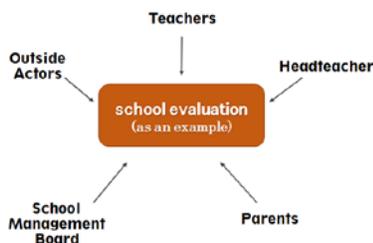


Figure 3. Graphic of the actors who influence the management of the school as drawn by the authors.

To begin with the school self-evaluation report, the present situation of the school education, and its improvements are argued together. However, there are not just a few problems for the school self-evaluation that is done by each school. Mr. G, the chairman of R school alliance and a local community member, pointed out “currently the school evaluation is ‘forced’ by the board of education” and “the school teachers tend to have a stereotypical image that the outcomes of children always have to become better.” A school management board committee member, Mr. F, who is a company manager and child welfare volunteer, pointed out that “even though it is very challenging just to maintain the status quo, it is not included (in the school self-evaluation report: the authors’ note) at all. Mr. E, executive director of the R school alliance and a company manager, referred to the problems of school evaluation as “even when the problem is on the part of the local community, there is a social structure that makes school suffer as if it is their own problem” (26 February 2014).

Regarding the school evaluation, there is often frustration between the school and the community members because a school cannot accurately depict its current situation in the self-evaluation report. Interestingly, however, the root of such argument seems to be from the attitude of the community members trying to positively catch the situation against self-critical schools. Mr. E said,

It is not shown in the self-evaluation report done by the school that there is a fact that more teachers are wanting to stay longer at this school. This is proof of school improvement. Moreover, although the school thinks that the Q city board of education will not accept the school evaluation report that does not follow the uniformed elements created by the city board, the board answered vice versa that they only gather all school evaluation reports but do not read through [them] because there is no time. (9 February 2016)

## Conclusions

### Reflection of Educational Management in Japan

In such complex school management conditions, if we focus on the headteacher among several school leaders, what choices can they make? As the headteacher tried to change the school management policy at the time of his arrival in the above case, the headteacher's authority is relatively strong in the Q city in general. Therefore, it is possible to some extent to eliminate the gap between the ideal and the reality by the competence of a headteacher. In the metropolitan area, on the contrary, headteachers sometimes become isolated. Headteacher V of the R district explained that she was marginalized from her school by the initiative of a teacher and was forced to get sick leave (24 March 2017). It indicates how different conditions exist from region to region, and the possible ways for the corresponding school management are particularly context-dependent. It indicates also that the simple technical theory or "how-to" books on school management become harmful.

Even if a headteacher can organise teachers and staff, the educational administration might intervene in her/his way instead of supporting. A board of education tends to be regarded as authoritative from a school's side. In this case, however, the schools' consciousness about school evaluation and the reality of educational administration were largely conflicting. If so, apart from the substance of educational administration and its policy, how a school perceives them considerably regulates the reality of school management. The work of a board of education sometimes, or often, surpasses a school's authority. Headteacher X who arrived at the S elementary school in April 2017 after completing his career at the J city board of education next to Q city said, "I would die if I

had to work there for over two years" (5 April 2017). If a school leader misunderstands without paying attention to various others' backgrounds and their situation, the problems of school multiply rather than get solved.

### How Can We Approach to the Reality of School Management

The reality of school management is extremely complex. Even under a uniform system or top-down policy, the reality at a school level does not show the same aspect. What the case study above indicates is that it is almost impossible to approach the reality of school management without viewing at least from the following phases:

- Diverse intentions within the school organisation: The differences among headteacher, teachers, staff, parents, community members, and children do not appear automatically though they exist.
- Various contributors outside the school: Even though the influence on school management is extremely large, it does not become obvious unless there is no corresponding recognition or encouragement from both sides, inside/outside the school.
- Rotation system in the personnel affairs: All teachers and staff including a headteacher move from one school to another school every few years.
- Delicate balances of school management: Sustainability and innovations are always both required for the school management in the public education sector.
- Careful mutual-understanding with educational administration: To overcome the top-down approach stemming from school distrust as well as an apathetic control depending on ignorance of educational administration, professional autonomy for public education must be embodied.
- Sharp insights into social change including its unpredictable elements: Instead of confining education in a current predictable

narrow range, education itself is to be always questioned.

From this kind of a viewpoint with various human and cultural networks, it could be explained through the social capital theory. It might also be explained as the outcome of institutional reform or municipal educational policy. From this research, however, it is obvious that the collaboration inside and outside school and the tight relationship between school and local community have been built historically. Such a feature which is regarded as self-evident or non-characteristic for the cultural insiders is barely analysed with a single, specific theoretical frame because the reality of school management can be described as a highly complicated structure.

In Japan, the community school policy was introduced in 2004 as a school management reform. Under this new system, the participation of parents and local community members began to be strengthened. The participation by parents, however, has not been substantial yet. Furthermore, student participation is not assured institutionally. In this regard, it will be next issue for this research is to interview students and parents who do not always participate in the decision-making process substantially.

### **Finding Alternatives for School Leaders**

Although the above is a consideration focusing on only the headteacher among the different school leaders, commonalities can be found for

teachers and staff. Meanwhile, there is a certain limitation for teachers and staff to reflect on school management because they are engaging in daily classes or other tasks. Therefore, it is expected for a headteacher mainly to deal with school management. This structure can pose a risk, as the reflection of school management depends on the competence of the headteacher alone.

The reflection itself is not a self-contained activity but is a relationship-dependent concept including dialogue. In order for headteachers to recognise the complexity of school management and to reflect it in relation to the macro context such as educational policy, continuous dialogue with researchers who have information and an analytic perspective is indispensable. For this purpose, researchers are also required to take responsibility with their viewpoints.

Finally, no matter how realistically school management can be described, there remains the question of which direction the school should take. Even at a school management board where various people participate, discussions tend to be focused on only their schools or just a little more towards their local communities. As a result, even rapid global changes that affect society or children's lives will not appear spontaneously in the discussion there. If the reflection of school management will be professionalised, the discussion of such challenges should not be avoided.

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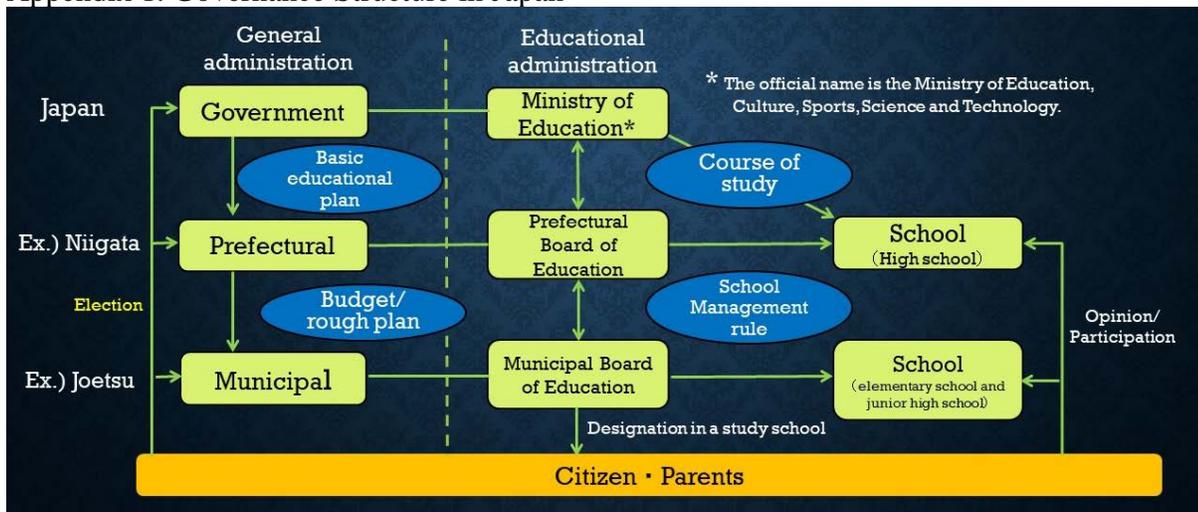
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### Authors

**Hiroki Suematsu**, M.A., is an associate professor at Tokyo Gakugei University in Japan. His research interests are contemporary reform of school management and professionalisation of school leaders.

**Kemma Tsujino**, M.A., is an associate professor at the Osaka City University in Japan. His research interests are public education in post nation state era and teacher education for global welfare.

Appendix 1. Governance Structure in Japan



(Resource: Imoto et. al. 2015, partially modified by the authors.)

Appendix 2. School Administration and Management Structure in Japan (Resource: made by the authors)

		Japan
school administration	national level	Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has authority for educational contents (Ex.) Course of study, official approval of textbooks, nationwide achievement tests, basic plan for education promotion, etc.
	state level	Prefectural Board of Education (Ex.) Personnel affairs
	municipal level	Municipal Board of Education (Ex.) Authority for facilities and equipment
school management	decision-making	Supreme decision-making body = headteacher School staff meeting is chaired by headteacher PTA and student council has no legal participation right.
	headteacher's authority	Headteacher has supreme authority.
	teachers' authority	School staff meeting is a subsidiary organisation of the headteacher. The teacher is a local public official with lifelong employment. *Teacher has little authority for participation in school management legally. * In reality, school staff meeting has a certain influence.
	educational participation	Educational participation is partly legislated (school councilor system etc.) *When a school designated as a 'community school', parents and local residents also have the rights for participation and deliberation.