



Policies and Practices of School Leaderships in Japan: A Case of Leadership Development Strategies in Akita

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Abstract

Reflecting the social and economic change, Japanese education has shifted to decentralization since the 1980s. With an increased autonomy and responsibility, the local government plays an important role to develop competent school leaders. This descriptive study employs case study approach to illustrate current status of leadership development at the local level in Japan. Through the analysis of current policies and practices, it lays out the strategies of leadership development in Akita prefecture. In addition, semi-structured interviews with 17 education leaders were conducted in 2014 and 2015 to explore their perceptions on the leadership development.

The study found that the leadership development in Akita is implemented combining formal and informal training activities. While a comprehensive professional development system is implemented strategically, informal learning of competency is commonly exercised. This dual approach enables school leaders to develop their leadership skills and knowledge.

Introduction

Since the 1980s, demands for educational reform has become evident, reflecting constantly changing social and economic conditions. Responding to these demands, a series of policy recommendations pushed Japanese education into an era of administrative liberalization and decentralization. With a greater autonomy and responsibility at the local government level, the enhancing skills and competencies of school leaders has become an urgent issue at the local level.

Schools leaders today are required to possess various competencies to make a coherent education community (Muta 2000; Osugi 2014). For example, a recent government policy report related school management lists three qualities that school leaders are expected to possess: 1) leadership to connect school personnel with diverse specialties, 2) presenting and clarifying vision, and 3) communication skills to establish partnership with community (Central Council for

Education 2015). However, it is also pointed out that most of the efforts to build school leaders' capacities are focusing on the technical aspects, instead of enhancing holistic skills to collaborate with various stakeholders to reflect their demands into educational practices (Tsujimura 2014). The authors have opportunities to work closely with education communities in Akita prefecture for a study related to transversal competencies and teacher training. Through the study, it is clear that their leadership development in educational communities is an important part of its coherent teacher training system.

This study explores structure and practice of leadership development using the case of local governments and schools in Akita. It attempts to lay out the strategies of leadership development within the Akita's unique context investigating the following questions: 1) how is school leadership training structured in Akita? and 2) what are the opportunities for developing school leadership other than a formal training program? This study intends to contribute to the knowledge on school leadership development in Japanese context.

Background

National Policies and Strategies of Professional Development for School Leaders

Since the 1990s, the concept of "school leadership" has been discussed in the context of education reforms which place emphasis on the enhancement of school autonomy and accountability (Tsujimura 2014; Owaki 2005). Decentralization of education brought changes to the system of school administration. Especially, roles of school leaders have been expanded. School leaders are expected to bare greater responsibilities in managing all aspects of school operations with accountability (Obayashi, Sako, and Egawa 2015).

Giving this background, in 1999, Educational Personnel Training Council of Ministry of Education Culture Sports Science and Technology (MEXT) (1999) claims that professional development for school leaders should contribute to improving their skills and knowledge on organizational management. Following this, National Commission on Educational Reform, established under the Prime Minister, submitted "Seventeen Proposals for Changing Education" in 2000. It claims that school leaders should be committed to improve their schools' efficiency in terms of organizational management to cope with complex and diverse problems of school education (National Commission on Educational Reform 2000). MEXT organized a working group for developing training curriculum on effective school management in 2002. The experts' group has introduced a prototype training curriculum focusing on organizational management at the school level (Edufront 2013). This curriculum has gradually been distributed since 2003 to local Boards of Education, schools and other public training institutions (MEXT n.d.).

Further, MEXT has placed emphasis on capacity building of mid-level school leaders such as senior teachers and head teachers (Kojima, Kumagai, and Suematu 2012; Owaki 2005). One of the reasons behind this movement lies in the fact that average age of the teacher population is increasing in Japan

(Fujimoto 2011; Owaki 2005). In addition, the importance of mid-level school leaders is recognized in the recent discussion to develop "school as a team." Mid-level leaders play essential role to enhance school management (Central Council for Education 2015). Particularly, mid-level leaders are required to facilitate communication to help less-experienced teachers in the school. National training programs for mid-level leaders has been expanded in terms of both number of participants and training contents (Hinata 2012).

National-Level Training Programs for School Leaders

National Center for Teachers' Development (NCTD) provides national-level training programs in cooperation with MEXT. The programs by NCTD are available to selected school leaders who are nominated by the Board of Education of local government. The participants are expected to play a central role in their region (NCTD 2014, 2015). In relation to leadership training, NCTD offers two training programs, namely, school administration training and training for future trainers on school organizational management (NCTD 2014). The school administration training programs are designed for the specific position and experiences, such as principal, vice-principal and mid-level teachers. These training programs cover various aspects of school administration. For example, in 2015, school administration training focused on four areas, including, organizational management, school compliance, risk management, and other issues on teaching (NCTD 2015).

NCTD also provides specialized training on school organizational management with two objectives: 1) to provide knowledge on theories and practices for effective organization management; and 2) to prepare school leaders as an expert trainer of school management in their region. Therefore, after completing the programs, the participants are expected to play a leading role in their region in the area of school organizational management. The training program include different activities, such as, lectures, discussions, and group works. (NCTD 2015). The trainers and lecturers of this program include experts of organizational management both in academics and private sector, such as university professors and managers of private companies (NCTD 2014).

School Leaders in Japan

In 2007, the School Education Act was revised and three new positions, "senior vice- principal," "senior teacher," and "advanced skills teacher," were established to promote effective school administration (MEXT 2006). There are three types of definitions currently used in Japan; they are narrow definition, wider definition, and widest definition (Owaki 2005). The narrow definition limits school leaders to upper level managements, namely, school principals, senior vice-principals, and vice-principals. The wider definition includes mid-level leaders such as senior teachers and head teachers. The widest definition further extends to heads of local Boards of Education and academic supervisors (Owaki 2005). As MEXT recognizes the importance of preparing mid-level teachers for school management in recent years (Fujimoto 2011; Owaki 2005), this study employs the second definition, including, principals, senior vice-principals, vice-principals, and mid-level leaders.

Research Design

This study aims to articulate current status of leadership development at prefectural level in Japan using Akita's case. Japanese local government plays a major role in providing professional development of teachers based on MEXT policies. This study illustrates how local government of Akita interprets roles of leadership in education and conduct leadership training. This study employs case study approach following the rationale that the descriptive information alone will be revelatory (Yin 2003). The nature of this case study is exploratory and descriptive.

The study discusses leadership development in public primary and junior high schools in Akita prefecture. Two municipalities, Yuzawa city and Higashi Naruse village are featured. Yuzawa city is located in south east of Akita prefecture. It is an agricultural area with rice production surrounded by mountains and rivers. There were 11 primary schools (1,887 students) and 6 junior high schools (1,153 students) in the city¹ (Akita Board of Education 2015). Higashi Naruse village is situated in southern east of Akita prefecture, where 93% of its area is forestry. There is one primary school (123 students) and one junior high school in the village (67 students) (Higashi Naruse Board of Education, in discussion with the authors, November 10, 2015).

Data for this study is collected from: 1) literature review on national and local policy documents and other related documents; and 2) interviews with school leaders in Akita prefecture. The desk study reviewed policy and administrative documents on the school leadership and professional development in national and local levels. Interviews were conducted during two visits to Akita in June 2014 and June 2015 with 17 education leaders. The background of interviewees was diverse ranging from prefectural to school level education leaders including members of Akita Bureau of Education, heads of municipal Boards of Education, school principals, vice-principals, and head teachers of teacher training units. Interviews were conducted based on semi-structured and open-ended questions, focusing on the following three points: 1) how leadership development is implemented at prefectural, municipal and school levels; 2) how roles of school leaders are perceived; and 3) what kind of efforts are made to realize the development of leadership skills.

Leadership Development in Akita Prefecture

This section presents a case of leadership development in Akita prefecture. First, it gives an overview on educational background, and second, the leadership development in formal settings is analyzed. Finally, it discusses other types of training activities and opportunities contributing to professional development of school leaders.

Characteristics of Education in Akita Prefecture

Akita prefecture is located in north eastern area of mainland of Japan. Education in Akita is led by the Board of Education, which consists of three divisions: The Bureau of Education, Educational Institutions, and Prefectural Public Schools.² The professional development programs, including leadership

training, are the responsibility of the Bureau of Education and the Akita Prefectural Education Center. There are four educational characteristics related to this case study.

First, in Akita, qualifications of school managements are defined with a combination of age and teaching experience. In Japan, the specific qualifications are stipulated at the local government level. The Akita Board of Education set relatively young age requirement for vice-principals, which is age of 37 with more than 15 years of experience as a teacher. As for the principal, the minimum age is 45 years old, but there is no requirement regarding teaching experience (MEXT 2015).

Second, Akita prefecture has been ranked at the top with the National Achievement Examination since it started in 2007 (Ishi and Ymada 2014); this achievement has not come easily; rather, it is a result of long time effort of the educators in Akita. In fact, their average score was lower than the national average in the 1950s. This struggle forced educators in Akita to change their education strategies, and introduced new ideas, including smaller class size, team-teaching, and collaboration with parents and communities (Akita Prefecture 2011).

Third, the age distribution of the teachers is unbalanced in Akita. Currently, more than 80% of the teachers are in their 40s and 50s, which implies a big proportion of the teachers will be retiring in the next 15 years. (A Chief of Akita Bureau of Education., in discussion with the authors, June 20, 2014). Therefore, Akita Board of Education expects a shortage of experienced school leaders, especially, mid-level school leaders (Akita Prefectural Education Center 2010, 2011).

Fourth, the learning opportunities among teachers has decreased, as the number of teachers within a school is decreased due to the scaling down of schools in Akita. This is an especially critical issue for rural schools. For this reason, building networks among schools is an important agenda for Akita Board of Education (Central Council for Education 2015).

With these characteristics in mind, this case study looks at Akita's leadership development from two different angles; formal leadership trainings, and other leadership development opportunities.

Formal Leadership Training

As discussed in the background section, the leadership training opportunities at the central level is limited to selected teachers. In other words, the local governments have responsibilities to bring up competent school leaders and foster their leadership skills. As an educational institution for teachers, Akita Prefectural Education Center plays a central role to plan and implement prefectural level teacher training, including leadership training programs. One of the missions of the center is to improve and implement the training programs based on the Akita Teacher Training System, which defines a standard for teachers' professional competencies as well as teacher quality. Since its establishment in 1985, the training system has been revised five times reflecting the needs of teachers in Akita. Leadership training activities are found particularly important, as two out of four priorities of the training are given to leadership training³: 1) bringing up mid-level leaders with a capacity of school management,

and 2) enhancing competency of experienced teachers, especially with their expertise in practical skills (Akita Board of Education 2011). Because Akita's leadership development programs are embedded in this teacher training system, it is important to discuss how professional development programs are organized in Akita. This section describes a currently implemented formal training structure based on the Akita Teacher Training System.

Structure of teacher training in Akita. Akita Teacher Training System covers areas of training thoroughly from different dimensions. It is organized based on teacher's career stages and the types of training. First, the training system is designed based on teachers' career stages, namely, establishment stage, middle-career stage, and late-career stage. While establishment stage focuses on building a basic quality and expertise, the middle-career stage aims to develop the quality of mid-level leader and enhance expertise. Further, professional development at the Late-Career stage targets enrichment of personal quality as a leader and to deepen their expertise.

Second, Akita's basic training⁴ is designed to provide appropriate training programs, including for school leaders. (Figure 1).

The basic training aims to enhance a wide range of practical skills for teachers. There are two types of basic trainings: 1) In-service training (IN-SET) based on teaching experience; and 2) Position-based training.

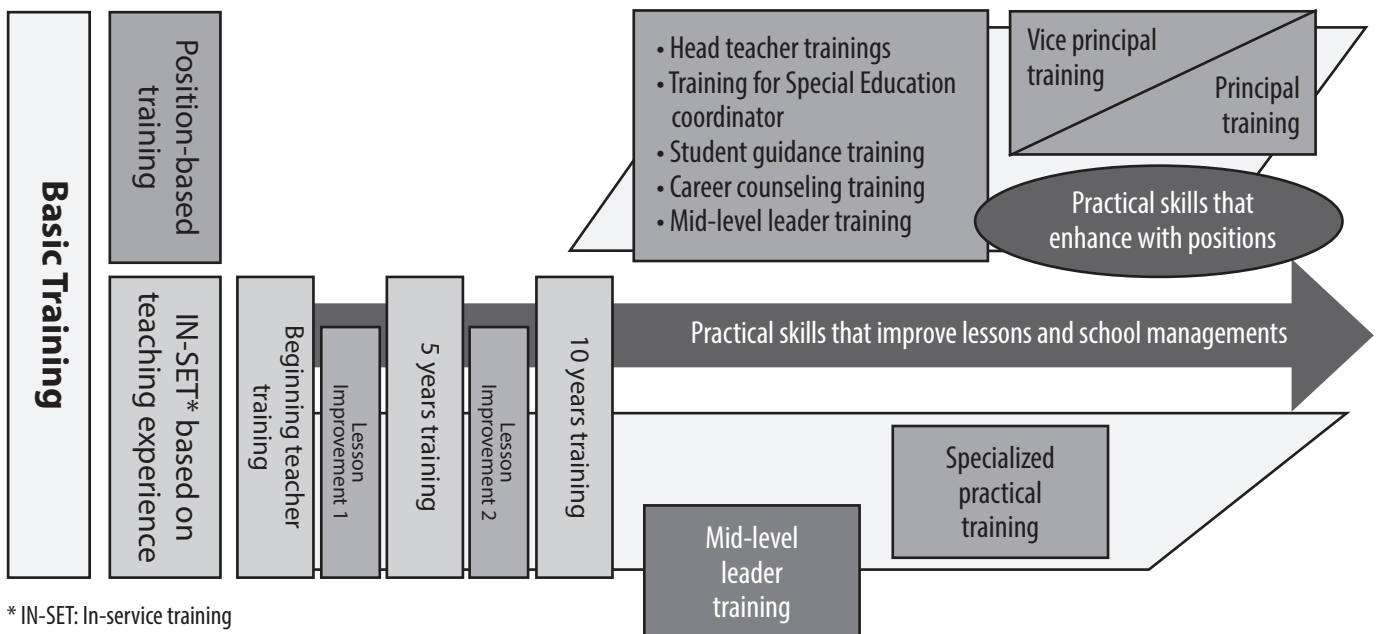
Within the In-SET, Akita prefecture provides continuous trainings in the first 10 years to build a foundation, and prepare for capacity building of mid-level leaders.⁵ (A Chief of Akita Bauru of Education, in discussion with the authors, June 20, 2014). After this stage, the mid-level leader training and the specialized practical training programs are provided to enhance their teaching and management skills.

Another type of basic training, Position-based training, aims to deepen teachers' specialized knowledge and leadership skills. Depending on the positions and responsibilities, training programs are implemented to foster specific skills for applicable teachers in the middle and late-career stage. As shown in Figure 1, the leadership development programs are placed as a next step of the IN-SET basic training for all teachers, and selected teachers with leadership positions.

Target skills and knowledge. The training programs are provided through the Akita Prefectural Education Center and the Bureau of Education. Akita Board of Education, clearly laid out the target skills and knowledge that should be gained

Figure 1 | Akita Prefecture Teacher Training System

Training Theme	Appropriate daily Trainings that enhance practical teaching skills		
Stage	Establishment Stage	Middle-career Stage	Late-career Stage
Goal	Build a basic quality as a teacher and acquire expertise	Develop the quality of the mid-level leader and enhance their expertise	Enhance a quality as a leader and manager as well as deepen their expertise



* IN-SET: In-service training

Source adopted: Akita Board of Education 2011, p.7; Akita Prefectural Education Center 2011.

Table 1 | Position-based teacher training offered at Akita Prefecture

	Session Title	Management	Planning and judgement	Training other members	Communication	Specialized skills on the job
Akita Prefectural Education Center	1 Middle leader training	◎	◎	○		
	2 Newly appointed career guidance director				○	◎
	3 Newly appointed student guidance director		○	◎		◎
	4 Newly appointed head teacher for a grade	◎	○	◎		○
	5 Newly appointed research head teacher	○	○		○	◎
	6 Newly appointed curriculum head teacher	◎			○	○
	7 Newly appointed vice principal	◎	○	○	○	
	8 Newly appointed principal	◎	○	○		
Akita Bureau of Education	9 Newly appointed special education coordinator			◎	○	◎
	10 Middle leader Training	◎	◎	○		
	11 Health director research conference	○	○			○
	12 Boardinghouse head training officer training		○		○	○
	13 Head research teacher conference		○	○		○
	14 Student guidance research conference		○		○	○
	15 Career guidance research conference		○		○	○
	16 Career education promoting conference		○		○	○
	17 Head curriculum teacher research conference	○	◎			
	18 Vice principal training	○	◎	○		
	19 Vice principal conference	○	◎	○		
	20 Principal conference	○	◎	○		
	21 Vice principal research conference	○	◎	○		
	22 Newly appointed vice principal training	◎	◎	○		
	23 Newly appointed principal training	◎	◎	○		
	24 Principal research conference	○	◎			
	25 Vice principal and head teacher training	○	◎	○		
	26 Management conference for kindergarten principal	○	◎	○		

◎ – Top priority ○ – Priority Blank – As necessary

Source adapted: Akita Board of Education, 2011, p. 11.

by school leaders. Table 1 is an extract of the list of programs currently provided within the position-based training and their target skills. It also indicates the priorities of target skills for each training program.

Moreover, Akita Board of Education specifies skills and knowledge to be gained in each program. This set of information reveals the strategy of Akita's leadership training. That is, how Akita Board of Education designed which skills and knowledge should be learned by school leaders, and what topics are needed to be covered. More importantly, this strategy is clearly presented not only to applicable leaders, but to all teachers in Akita prefecture. This is an effective strategy as teachers and leaders are able to share what is expected to serve as a leader in the different stages of professional development. Table 2 is an example of the position based training programs offered by Akita Prefectural Education Center.

The structure of the programs implies that Akita Bureau of Education prioritizes specific and practical skills for principals and vice-principals, such as management and planning and judgement. Meanwhile mid-level leaders are expected to be equipped with the core leadership skills, such as communication and training other members. The target knowledge is depending on the position; for example, "research method in school" is a core knowledge for research head teachers and "organization management method" is offered for head teachers of a grade. These skills and knowledge are gained by understanding their roles and issues related to their positions (Akita Board of Education 2011; Akita Prefectural Education Center 2015).

This teacher training system illustrates how Akita Board of Education has analyzed their unique situation and strategically implemented their training to foster school leaders.

Table 2 | Position-based teacher training organized at Akita Prefectural Education Center

Session Title	Skills to be gained						Knowledge to be gained	Main topics of the program
	Management	Planning and Judgement	Training other members	Communication	Specialized skills on the job			
1 Middle leader training	◎	◎	○				- Laws related to school - Management method	• Discovering issues • Setting theme • Organization management
2 Newly appointed career guidance director				○	◎		- Responsibility of career guidance director	• Role of career guidance director • Current situation and issues of career guidance
3 Newly appointed student guidance director		○	◎		◎		- Responsibility of student guidance director	• Role of student guidance director • Student guidance • The concept of educational counseling in school
4 Newly appointed head teacher for a grade	◎	○	◎		○		- Organization management method	• Issues on grade management • Role of a head teacher of a grade
5 Newly appointed research head teacher	○	○		○	◎		- Research method in school	• Method of education research in school • The current situation and issues on research study in school
6 Newly appointed curriculum head teacher	◎			○	○		- Management method - Education laws	• Roles and responsibilities • School operation and management
7 Newly appointed vice principal	◎	○	○	○			- Management method - Personnel evaluation	• School organization management • Personnel evaluation
8 Newly appointed principal	◎	○	○				- Management method	• School organization management • Issues on the school management • Risk management

◎ – Top priority ○ – Priority Blank – As necessary

Source adopted: Akita Board of Education, 2011, p. 11.

Other Leadership Development Opportunities

In addition to formal training programs for leadership development, educators in Akita utilize various opportunities for enhancing capacity of school leaders. This section explores such examples that influence effective school leadership development in practice.

Personnel relocation. The personnel relocations among schools within a municipality are carried out regularly as an important strategy to achieve efficient administration and to adapt necessary changes (Akita Board of Education 2015). Moreover, it also functions as leadership development. When mid-management level leaders are relocated, a new environment provides them learning opportunities to handle new challenges, and such conditions allows them to further cultivate leadership skills. Sometimes personnel relocation is employed beyond the school district to transfer knowledge, skills, cultures and practices. In fact, the cases are found that excellent teachers are relocated to surrounding municipalities, and are expected to play mentor roles in the new school. (A head of Board of Education in discussion with the authors, June 25, 2015).

The personnel relocations are not limited among schools. Teachers in middle to late-career stages sometimes are transferred to administrative offices, including Boards of Education, and expected to contribute to the educational planning with their practical experiences. After several years of assignment, they are transferred back to schools with leadership positions. This personnel relocation system functions to build close networks between administrative offices and schools. Such opportunities enable education leaders in administrative office and schools to build shared visions in planning and implementing educational policies and practices. (A head of Board of Education, in discussion with the authors, June 20, 2014).

For these reasons, relocating teachers is critical, not only for knowledge transfer, but also for capacity building of school leaders through different experiences. In fact, the interview with a head of local Board of Education confirmed the benefits of personnel relocation through his own experience. He believes that all the experiences at different positions he served, including at the prefectural administrative offices and schools, made him what he is as an education leader (A head of Board of Education, in discussion with the authors, June 17, 2014).

Collaboration opportunities for mutual learning. School teachers enhance their leadership capacity by learning from each other. Two examples illustrate this type of leadership development: 1) Council of Education Research Institute, and 2) study groups of principals and vice-principals.

First, the leadership is cultivated through collaboration opportunities among local government officials and school leaders. The Board of Education in Yuzawa city has a Council of Education Research Institute to conduct research and make policy suggestions for the Board of Education (Yuzawa Board of Education 2014). The members are academic supervisors from the Board of Education, selected school managements and mid-level leaders. This opportunity enables members to

work together to achieve a common goal. For example, while an academic supervisor provides theoretical background of the pedagogies, mid-level leaders offer concrete educational practices occurred in the classrooms. In addition, a principal's focus on school management and philosophy to achieve educational goals is important. These dialogues can function as excellent learning opportunities from different experts and creating synergy among council members. The selection of the participating members is critical as they are expected to influence other teachers at their own schools and offices (An academic Supervisor, and a head of education board, in discussion with the authors, June 25, 2015).

Second, leadership skills are enhanced through study groups formed by school leaders. For instance, school principals and vice-principals in the municipality organize respective study groups to create proactive learning opportunities. By sharing experiences of a specific case, school leaders gain knowledge, such as a management procedure, a method and process of problem solving, and an approach to build community relationships. Akita Board of Education also encourages and supports such study groups (Akita Prefectural Education Center 2015). In fact, a head of Board of Education also considers these meetings as good leadership development opportunities; therefore, he tries to make an appearance as much as he can to provide advices and comments (A head of education board, in discussion with the authors, June 25, 2015).

Two-way channels of communication. Two-way channels of communication are vital for building good relationships and trust between board of education and school leaders, and it becomes an important opportunity for capacity building of school leaders. In order to effectively cultivate leadership competencies, the administrative leaders make efforts to build communication channels with school leaders, especially principals and vice-principals. Therefore, when these school leaders face problems and issues, they do not hesitate to share their concerns. A head of Board of Education believes that the recent improvement of the school leaders' quality in his municipality is a result of the good relationships he had built with each school management. He trusts school leaders to report everything, both achievements and challenges, so that he is well informed what is happening at the school level and provides appropriate advice to the leaders (A head of Board of Education in discussion with the authors, June 25, 2015). The necessity of the close relationships among education leaders was also expressed by multiple school leaders, and they appreciate support and availability of the Board of Education, especially a head of the office for their professional development.

It was evident that heads of Boards of Education consider themselves as advisors and mentors for school leaders in their municipalities. This type of interaction occurs in both professional settings and personal context. Educational leaders recognize the effectiveness of such relationships because it allows school leaders to express their opinions and thoughts freely. Such effective relationships are built upon continuous efforts. A head of Board of Education stated that

the current success is a result of a long-lasting collegueship with the school leaders, which dated back to the time he was a young school teacher.

Informal communication at school level. The study found that informal communication between school leaders and teachers at the school level serves as excellent opportunities for leadership development as well. In schools in Akita, informal communications are taking place on a daily basis, including in classrooms, teachers' rooms and school corridors. Such educational cultures and environments allow communication across age, gender, the subject, and grade. Information accumulated through such communication assists school leaders to better understand the situation in practice, and eventually make good decisions for effective school management. In fact, sharing issues and thoughts openly for creating consolidated educational communities is a core principle of Akita's education. It is considered that such an environment has become premise for producing competent school leaders. This was a well understood principle by school leaders interviewed, and they appreciate and proactively exercise informal communications with their teachers to enhance their skills as leaders.

Summary of Findings and Discussions

Through the analysis of leadership development in Akita, five major findings are identified. First, the case study found that Akita prefecture has established and implements a comprehensive professional development system which reflects conditions and needs of local schools. Firstly, the Akita Prefecture Teacher Training System is structured based on teacher's career stage, namely establishment stage, middle-career stage, and late-career stage. This system covers all educators, including managements. Secondly, the training is continuously provided. It allows individual leaders and teachers to develop their necessary skills and knowledge at their schools. Following the 10 years of in-service teacher training during the establishment stage, all the teachers receive general leadership training regardless of their positions. Thirdly, for school leaders who are in middle-career stage, the position-based training programs with specific contents are provided to applicable school leaders to supplement their skills and knowledge. Such strategic leadership training structure is established within the Akita Teacher Training System.

Second, the contents and goals of leadership training in each program are clearly presented to all teachers in Akita; thus, what is expected to become a leader in different stages is evident. For instance, the target skills and knowledge to be acquired through the training programs are clearly laid out for each position-based training program. It illustrates a desirable leadership figure in education. From the strategic point, the analysis found that training programs for the school leaders in middle-career stage focus on basic and core skills, such as skills in management, planning and judgement, and training other members. Whereas, the training programs for the school leaders in late-career stage, such as school principals and vice principals, emphasize skills on management, planning, and judgement. These appropriate skills and

knowledge are expected to be gained by understanding specific roles and responsibilities.

Third, in addition to formal training programs, diverse forms of educational practices are available for leadership development in Akita. The opportunities are embedded in various educational practices, such as personnel relocation and collaborative work with different levels of school leaders. These opportunities not only supplement the formal training, but also stay indispensable for quality professional development of school leaders.

Fourth, school leaders perceive informal communication with teachers as an effective way to enhance their capacities. Communication allows leaders to build a sense of trust and a solidarity within the school community. The multiple school leaders stated that as communication is a mean of mutual learning, creating an environment where all teachers can freely express their thoughts is essential. This implies there is a firm belief that vigorous dialogue among educators bring out better educational solutions.

Fifth, the policy documents state preparing teachers in middle-career stage with quality leadership is an important objective in Akita. This is partly due to the unbalanced age distribution of the teachers. This point was also confirmed from the interview with the chief of Akita Bureau of Education. In order to maintain the quality of Akita's education, a strategic leadership training is vital. While experienced teachers are still available in the practice, transferring their knowledge and lessons learned from their experience to the prospective school leaders is an urgent issue. Akita Teacher Training System carefully analyzes the important issues and reflects local needs in crafting effective leadership training programs.

As illustrated in the findings, the leadership development in Akita is implemented in combining formal and informal training activities. It is an appropriate and effective leadership development model, as previous studies claim that external training programs alone do not prepare and develop effective leaders. Instead, it should be implemented together with internal and contextual support within the institution, recognized as organizational socialization (Gunter and Ribbins 2002; Zhang and Brundrett 2010). Furthermore, it should be noted that the education leaders interviewed in this study expressed the effectiveness and importance of informal leadership training activities. Although research on the impact of informal leadership skill development is still limited, recent literature share the evidence that informal learning is an important component for leadership development. For instance, Eno, Kehrhahn and Bell (2003) found managers in the business sector mostly learned all the investigated 20 core management skills from informal learning activities. In the school context, Zhang and Brundrett (2010) found that head teachers, recognized as mid-level school leaders, preferred mentoring and experiential leadership development, rather than formal training programs. Authors expect the findings from the Akita's case will contribute to the literature supporting effectiveness of informal leadership development in education context.

Conclusion

This study featured school leadership development in Akita, identifying its unique strategies and practices. The means of preparing current and future school leaders is not limited to the formal training programs, but also exists in other opportunities available in the education communities. This dual approach enables school leaders to develop their holistic leadership skills and knowledge. This is an important contribution to the knowledge base of school leadership development with Japanese context. The case illustrated in this study is only a part of educational practices in Japan. However, the authors expect that this in-depth analysis with multiple perspectives would provide insights and contribute to enhance strategies and practices of leadership development in other areas of the world.



Endnotes

¹ As of May 1, 2015.

² The Bureau of Education is the main administrative office, Educational Institution manages various educational facilities, such as libraries and Akita Prefectural Education Center, and Prefectural School division oversees prefectural schools.

³ Four focus of the training priorities are; a) shifting the focus from quantity to quality by utilizing "On the Job Trainings" for the beginning teacher, b) implementing continuous trainings to enhance professional competency of the young teachers, c) bringing up mid-level leaders with a capacity of school management, and d) enhancing competency of experienced teachers, especially with their expertized practical skills (Akita Board of Education 2011).

⁴ In addition to basic training, Akita provides specialized training and other trainings. These trainings provide program on the special topics, and are available throughout teacher's career.

⁵ In addition to nationally required training at 1st and 11th year of service, Akita requires 5 years training and lesson improvement training for all teachers.

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