

How Institutional Contexts Shape School Leadership:

A Comparative Study of China and Japan

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Abstract

This study explores how institutional contexts shape the formation and enactment of principal leadership through a comparative analysis of China and Japan. Using insights from historical and sociological institutionalism, this study examines how institutional contexts shape leadership formation. The findings suggest that the relationship between institutional context and leadership is not straightforward.

Focusing on two contrasting cases in East Asia, China and Japan, this study considers how differing institutional logics, governance structures, and socio-cultural traditions influence school leadership. It addresses two main research questions: (1) What constitutes the institutional context of school leadership in China and Japan? and (2) How do these contexts shape the formation and practice of principal leadership? Through this comparison, the study highlights both the constraints and the enabling conditions within institutional contexts.

Although leadership development has often been framed in terms of individual competencies, motivation, and professional learning, recent research has increasingly emphasized the role of contextual factors, including cultural norms, policy environments, and institutional arrangements. However, existing research provides little clarity on how leaders actively engage with and draw on these institutional contexts in their everyday practice. To address this gap, this study turns to historical and sociological institutionalism to explore how institutional contexts shape leadership formation.

The study uses a qualitative approach, combining document analysis and comparative case studies. The data consist of national laws and policy documents from China and Japan, including China's Teacher Law and Education Law, relevant regulations on principal appointment and training, and Japan's School Education Law and Local Educational Administration Law. In addition, the study analyzes professional publications, principals' narratives, and school-level documents to examine how institutional contexts are interpreted and enacted in practice. The analysis distinguishes between "static" institutional contexts—formal rules, regulations, and policy frameworks—and "dynamic" contexts, including historical developments, policy changes, and how actors interpret and negotiate these institutions.

The study first uses document analysis to clarify the structure and key features of the institutional context, and then explores its dynamic dimensions by tracing changes in relevant laws and

central government policies in Japan and China. The study analyzes the static aspects of the institutional context through policy documents, with particular attention to how these frameworks are implemented at the local and school levels. Building on this, it conducts case studies of representative principals in both countries, focusing on their leadership practices and management approaches. By comparing these cases, the study examines how institutional contexts shape the development and enactment of principal leadership. Finally, the study conducts a comparative analysis using a Most Different Systems Design, given the substantial institutional and socio-political differences between China and Japan.

The findings suggest that institutional contexts not only constrain leadership practices but also offer resources that principals can strategically use. In China, where state control and centralized governance are prominent, institutional frameworks set clear expectations and boundaries for school leadership. Yet rather than simply constraining leadership development, these structures can enable principals to exercise agency through flexible policy interpretation and the use of institutional authority to address practical challenges.

In contrast, Japan's institutional context features a highly structured and protective system that ensures stability and legitimacy in school management. In particular, curriculum guidelines and governance structures established by the board of education provide a stable foundation for principal leadership. Although this environment provides substantial support, it also comes with strong expectations of accountability and public trust, which may limit risk-taking and innovation in leadership.

The study shows that the relationship between institutional context and leadership is not linear. Instead, leadership is shaped through ongoing interaction between institutional structures and human agency. Even in highly centralized or supportive systems, principals actively interpret, negotiate, and draw on institutional conditions in context-specific ways. This finding challenges simple dichotomies such as "control versus autonomy" and highlights the need to view leadership as a socially and institutionally embedded process.

This study makes three key contributions to the field of educational leadership. First, it advances a more grounded understanding of institutional context by integrating historical and sociological institutionalism into leadership research. Second, it offers empirical insights from a comparative analysis of East Asian education systems, which remain underrepresented in the international

literature. Third, it shows that institutions are not only constraints but also enabling structures that shape leadership practice through their interaction with agency.

By reconceptualizing the role of institutional context, this study suggests that efforts to strengthen principal leadership should extend beyond a narrow focus on individual capacity building to consider how institutional environments can be designed to support leadership development. The findings have important implications for policy design, leadership preparation, and cross-national learning in education governance.

Keywords: School Leadership, Institutional Context, New Institutionalism, China and Japan, Comparative Education