

Reconfiguring Principal Training in the Context of Autonomous School Management: Evidence from Japan and Its Global Implications

Research Overview

This study investigates how Japan's evolving autonomous school management has reshaped principal training across three historical phases. Applying educational leadership theory, it analyzes shifts in training content, purposes, and pedagogies. Findings reveal a transition from compliance-based to reflective, inquiry-oriented leadership development, offering critical insights for global policy debates on school governance and leader preparation.

Purpose of Study

This study aims to examine how the transformation of autonomous school management in Japan has reshaped the content, objectives, and pedagogical approaches of principal training. By employing educational leadership theory as an analytical framework, it seeks to clarify how changing governance contexts and evolving leadership expectations have driven the reconfiguration of professional learning for school leaders. Furthermore, the study aims to contribute to the global discourse on educational leadership by providing a historically grounded analysis of how national training systems adapt to increasing demands for school autonomy, accountability, and reflective practice.

Research Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods design. Data sources include: (1) non-public internal documents from NITS (2001–present), accessed through institutional collaboration; (2) a questionnaire survey of retired principals from the 2001–2006 GKK cohort; and (3) semi-structured interviews with principals who participated in training. Using educational leadership theory as an analytical framework, the study adopts a historical-comparative approach across three phases (2001–2005, 2006–2019, 2020–present). Triangulation of internal documents, survey, and interview data reveals both policy intentions and principals' lived experiences of training reconfiguration.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of documents and related materials reveals that the reconfiguration of principal training in response to Japan's autonomous school management reforms has proceeded through three distinct phases.

Phase 1 (2001–2005): Culturally embedded, community-building orientation.

Training lasted three weeks at Tsukuba (location of NITS). Curricula included not only educational theory but also broad liberal arts subjects such as business management and law, delivered by nationally renowned figures—including athletes and entertainment industry executives sharing success narratives. Weekend cultural excursions (e.g., Kabuki performances in Tokyo) and collective choral activities were formally incorporated. Principals spontaneously organized the GKK alumni network during this period. Survey responses from this cohort strongly emphasize that the prolonged residential format fostered deep peer bonding and a sense of professional solidarity, which they retrospectively value as equally important as formal curricula. However, these principals also noted a lack of systematic connection between training content and the practical demands of autonomous school management.

Phase 2 (2006–2019): Legal compliance plus managerial professionalism.

Training was reduced to two weeks and became more structured around legal knowledge and management practices. Principals engaged in legal text analysis and studied areas such as organizational, curriculum, and crisis management. Although competencies were not explicitly defined, the curriculum increasingly emphasized strategic decision-making, stakeholder coordination, and risk management. Compared to Phase 1, leadership expectations became more explicit and managerial. While participants reported improved preparedness for accountability demands, interviews suggest that the training remained largely prescriptive, with limited opportunities for reflection or adaptive leadership development.

Phase 3 (2020–present): Managerial efficiency with reflexive inquiry.

Training has been further shortened to one week while retaining core management content from Phase 2. However, the program is now structured around reflexive inquiry. Participants begin by examining their own leadership practices, questioning assumptions, and identifying school-based challenges. These questions guide subsequent learning, with management content serving as a

resource to deepen inquiry rather than an end in itself. Dialogic small-group discussions play a central role, enabling participants to engage with diverse perspectives and critically reflect on their beliefs. The aim is to reconstruct principals' value systems through inquiry grounded in authentic leadership dilemmas, rather than imposing predefined competencies. Participants generally appreciate this approach, though some note that the compressed format limits opportunities for deeper dialogue and transformative reflection.

Discussion

The shift from Phase 1 (community-building) to Phase 2 (legal and managerial emphasis) and Phase 3 (reflexive inquiry) reflects changing leadership epistemologies under Japan's autonomous school management reforms.

A key contribution of this study is the identification of an institutional learning trajectory in principal training design. Phase 3 does not merely add reflection but restructures the program: management knowledge shifts from an end to a means for deepening inquiry grounded in principals' own contexts. This reflexive design addresses the gap between standardized competencies and context-specific leadership dilemmas.

Survey and interview data show that principals consistently value peer dialogue and reflection. However, training duration has progressively decreased—from three weeks to one—raising concerns about limited time for meaningful engagement. Phase 3 attempts to compensate through tighter integration of reflection and content, though its effectiveness remains uncertain.

The Japanese case offers three implications. First, competency frameworks alone are insufficient without linking them to practitioners' own questions. Second, reflexive inquiry can be embedded even in short programs, but requires intentional design. Third, the tension between efficiency and the time-intensive nature of transformative learning persists, making Phase 3 an innovative yet still fragile response.

Keywords (max 5)

Principal training; Autonomous school management; Educational leadership; Japan; School governance reform