RESEARCH ARTICLE

*European Journal of Education and Pedagogy*
*www.ej-edu.org*

# Savoir-Faire: Challenges with Leading Learning in IB Authorized Schools in Japan

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**ABSTRACT**

**The study explores the reception of the new IB evaluation process by several IB authorized Article 1 schools in Japan, and how they responded to the challenges they faced during the implementation of their respective program development plans. The study examines the nature of the learning process that took place during implementation, focusing on the strategies that the schools came up with to overcome the challenges they encountered. The evaluation process introduced by the IB likely presented new and complex challenges to the schools, such as adapting to new evaluation criteria or meeting the expectations of the IB. By examining the responses of the schools to these challenges, the study may offer insights into effective strategies for managing complex educational programs and for implementing new evaluation processes. This information could be useful not only to other IB authorized schools in Japan, but also to educational institutions around the world facing similar challenges.**

**Keywords:** international baccalaureate, leadership, learning organizations, school evaluation process.

**Published Online:** April 10, 2023

**ISSN**: 2736-4534

**DOI**: 10.24018/ejedu.2023.4.2.631

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## I. Introduction

Leadership in Japanese schools is often characterized by a hierarchical and rigid structure, with a strong emphasis on discipline and conformity. One issue that has been identified with this type of leadership is a lack of transparency, as decision-making is often centralized and kept within a small group of leaders. This can lead to a lack of communication and participation from teachers, students, and parents, and a lack of accountability for the actions of leaders. Additionally, the traditional culture of respect for authority and a reluctance to question or challenge those in positions of power can make it difficult for concerns to be raised and addressed.

Since the late 1980s, there has been a growing demand for educational reform in Japan, and this has led to a significant shift in the country's educational system. One of the key features of this shift has been the move towards greater "administrative liberalization and decentralization of education" (Yamamoto, B. *et.al*, 2007). Prior to this era of reform, the Japanese education system was highly centralized, with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) playing a dominant role in setting policies and standards for schools across the country. However, in response to calls for greater local autonomy and flexibility, the government began to implement a series of reforms aimed at devolving power and authority to local authorities and schools. These reforms included providing municipal boards of education with the freedom to act more autonomously, responsibly and take initiative, thus encouraging schools and boards to act at their own discretion in developing systems, and tinkering with new and creative approaches in the classroom that would value children's individuality (Yamanaka *et.al*., 2020).

Despite the government policy reports' emphasis on the need for school leaders to possess leadership, vision, and communication skills (Central Council for Education, 2015) and to build collaborative and authentic learning communities in schools, very little in the form of guidance is provided on how to go about doing it. How to help in developing school leaders for example, to become able to nurture positive learning environments that foster teacher agency and an inclusive and collaborative community of learner practitioners, which requires a shift in mindset from a fixed mindset to a more participatory and reflective growth mindset. School leaders should also provide teachers with opportunities for ongoing self-reflection and peer feedback on their teaching, as well as contribute to the development and re-development of school policy documents to ensure that their voices are heard and valued. The often-perfunctory way in which these recent government proposals are implemented however, can be attributed to a lack of understanding or buy-in from school leaders, or a resistance to change from teachers and other stakeholders resulting in little real change being imposed (Cave, 2016). Either way, it equates to very little to no progress seen in many schools in becoming "authentic learning communities" across the country to this day.

The International Baccalaureate (IB) is an organization that supports schools in developing to become "learning organizations" that foster inquiry, critical thinking, and intercultural understanding among not only students, but teachers, parents, and other stakeholders of the school as a community of learners. Since its inception in 1968, the IB has grown to become a global community of over 5000

authorized schools across the world, working to nurture learners who are compassionate, knowledgeable, and capable of creating a more peaceful world through understanding and respect. (IBO, 2015). In recent years, the IB has made significant changes to its school evaluation process. One of the key changes is the emphasis on supporting schools to become more autonomous, providing guidance and opportunities for all members of the school community to identify the areas for improvement and develop strategies to address them. The IB now offers authorized IB World Schools across the globe the opportunity to engage in an ongoing evaluation process, whereby schools work to continuously improve their capacity to implement and develop IB programs. The evaluation process requires schools to engage in a reflective process that leads to a deeper understanding of the effective aspects of the program and the areas that need further development (IBO, 2022). It is designed to help schools work intentionally and strategically to develop its IB program(s) and to direct its efforts and resources in a more effective manner, and to build a culture of continuous improvement and to develop the capacity of their teachers as leaders. By engaging in the evaluation process, schools can identify professional development needs and opportunities for the different members of their school community. Overall, the evaluation process is designed to provide schools with meaningful, contextually appropriate feedback from the IB on the development of the program(s) in the school. The IB can therefore play a key role in supporting government education reform agendas by providing valuable insights and recommendations to IB authorized schools in Japan, based on its evaluation process.

In Japan, the government has recognized the value of the IB, and in May 2013, entered into an agreement with the organization to start the IB Dual Language Diploma Program Project. The aim of this project being to increase the number of IB authorized schools in Japan by making it easier for Japanese Article 1 schools (schools defined by Article 1 in the Basic Act of Education) to adopt the IB Diploma Program in their own native language. The project will do this by increasing the number of IB Diploma Program course offerings in Japanese (Yamamoto, et.al. 2016). This study explores how the new IB evaluation process has been received by several IB authorized Article 1 schools in Japan, and the nature of the learning process that took place during implementation of their respective program development plans that they have designed. The study specifically examined how the schools responded to the countless challenges they faced during implementation and the strategies they came up with to try and overcome those challenges.

## II. Research Setting

Seven Japanese Article 1 schools in both the public and private sector participated in this study, as part of a recent support project with the IB called the Language and Learning Program Development Pilot Project between October 2021~October 2022. One of the requirements to participate in this project was for schools to be IB authorized and to be Japanese Article 1 schools. From working with and listening to many stakeholders in IB schools in Japan, the IB has recognized the need for these schools to develop a better understanding of language learning in the IB, and how to establish systems and models to better promote it across the whole school community. The project aimed to offer support to these Japanese Article 1 schools by assigning an experienced IB lead educator to work with the school as a consultant to help guide them through the different stages of the evaluation process. It was important therefore for the IB lead educators to listen attentively to the schools and help them through the process of first identifying the issues and then later developing strategies to overcome those issues on their own. It was important to not impose an outside language learning model onto the schools but rather build on their context, to develop language learning models that are culturally appropriate and has a better fit.

The data collected for analysis consisted of two types of information:

1) Field notes: These were taken during semi-structured interviews with the IB lead educators. The interview consisted of open-ended questions to allow the participants to share their experiences and perspectives freely. Detailed notes were taken of what was seen, heard, and experienced during the interview. Descriptive language was used to capture the nuances of the situation being observed. Nonverbal cues such as body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions were also carefully recorded to provide valuable insights into the participants' emotions and attitudes.
2) School documents: These were shared prior to and produced during the implementation of each school's program development plan during the 12-month period. These documents included written plans, reports, memos, and/or other materials that were relevant to the implementation of the program.

Both sources of data were used to gain insight into the implementation of the program and its effectiveness in each school. The field notes provided a more personal and subjective account of the participants' experiences, while the school documents provided more objective information about the programmer's implementation. By using and analyzing both sources of data, a comprehensive understanding of the programmer's impact was gained. This study traces each school's journey through implementation from this early stage and sought to identify emergent social patterns while observing and analyzing their attempts as they worked to find ways to overcome the barriers and challenges that came up, and the strategies and tools that they developed to overcome those barriers during the course of their implementation.

## III. Methodology: The Grounded Theory Approach

Grounded theory is a research methodology with a focus on the emergence of theory from data. The goal of grounded theory is to generate theories that are based on the experiences and perspectives of the participants in the study, rather than imposing preconceived notions or hypotheses onto the data. While data is systematically collected and analyzed, "the cardinal rule in grounded theory is to not undermine the discovery of latent patterns in data by preconceiving what to

look for or what type of data to use." (Holton, J., Walsh, I. 2017, p. 73) The researcher therefore is required to follow the data, and have it guide the researcher through the different stages of the research, using the constant comparative method. It is a general research methodology that uses any and all types of data, both quantitative and qualitative, and "is more about the context of discovery than the context of justification." (Gibson, B. & Hartman, J., 2014, p. 43) All semi-structured interviews were open-ended, and care was taken to ensure that participants of the study felt comfortable in freely talking about their views and perspectives. Key words were captured during the interviews and observations, and later elaborated into more extensive field notes, that were later coded using the constant comparison method to identify relevant indicators or concepts that would be used for later analysis (theoretical sampling, theoretical sorting, etc.) to allow for the emergence of a grounded theory. Readers interested in the details of this research methodology may refer to Glaser (1978).

Careful facilitation of this research methodology provided many opportunities to capture real incidents (experiences, stories, gossip, confessions, etc.) that suggested a concept or a pattern of behavior to help in explaining what is going on in the situation that is being studied. Conceptual codes were constantly compared to verify what concepts, if any, were buried within the descriptive content and to confirm that they were grounded in the data. Theoretical memos were kept and compiled as data were being coded, to help in uncovering what was happening in the situation at hand; to capture patterns that were repeatedly occurring in the data; and to progress the study through the different stages of the research to the eventual discovery of an emergent grounded theory. Data collected at later stages in the study (ie. literature related to the research topic) were added later to elaborate and saturate codes, properties and/or conceptual categories to further ground the emergent theory.

## IV. Findings: The Theory of Savoir-Faire

The findings in this study are presented in the form of carefully grounded integrated conceptual hypotheses of the substantive area or "probability statements about the relationship between concepts that account for the behaviors seen in the substantive area" (Glaser, 1998, p. 3). The purpose of the study is not to make factual comparisons between the different schools that participated in the project. This section will rather describe the social processes and relationships that were observed through the analysis of emerging concepts, to understand how people interact and create meaning within social contexts.

The outcome of the analysis in this study was the emergence of a basic social structural process (BSSP) shown in Fig. 1 below.

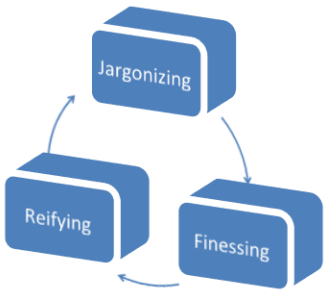


Fig. 1. The basic social structural process of savoir-faire.

A basic social structural process refers to a fundamental mechanism or pattern of social organization that shapes social relationships and interactions (Glaser, B. & Holdton, J., 2005). These processes are often long-lasting and deeply embedded in society and can have wide-ranging effects on individuals and groups. Savoir faire is a French term that refers to the ability to act or speak appropriately in social situations, often through a combination of social skills and knowledge of cultural norms. The theory surfaced as a result of a recurring social pattern that emerged whilst monitoring how teachers and program coordinators in each school interacted with their consultants, and how the school as a whole approached and engaged in the different stages of the evaluation process based on the program development plan that they designed. Conversations with the lead educators showed that the program coordinators and school leadership team that participated in this project all showed great interest and enthusiasm of the project initially, seeing it as an opportunity to further improve and enhance the delivery and quality of their program. The level of implementation that followed however, varied from school to school. Some factors that influenced this variability include the nature of the change, the extent to which teachers and other stakeholders were involved in the change process, the level of communication and transparency throughout the change process, and the level of support provided to teachers and other stakeholders during the implementation period. Despite the observed variations however, school leaders from all of the participating schools exhibited a common leadership approach. Whether it is when they are making quick decisions or adapting to changing circumstances, they always appeared to do it while relying on a combination of social cues and intuition to guide their behavior. This process can be broken into three stages: jargonizing, finessing, and reifying. These are three related but distinct core concepts that repeatedly surfaced during the analysis and have been identified as the key players in steering this basic social structural process that places an importance on maintaining positive relationships and avoiding confrontation, even at the expense of individual accountability.

### *A. Jargonizing*

Jargonizing refers to the practice of using technical or specialized language that is specific to a particular field or profession. It is a way of communicating with others who share the same knowledge and expertise but may be difficult for those who are not familiar with the terminology to understand. This can include using buzzwords, acronyms, or other jargon that may obscure the true meaning of what is

being communicated, making it difficult for others to ask questions or challenge assumptions. Jargonizing generally was observed during discussions that focused on National curriculum requirements imposed by MEXT on to accredited Article 1 schools. It was often later found to be used as a form of defense mechanism, possibly to avoid accountability, to deflect criticism, or avoid taking responsibility for negative outcomes by making it appear as though they are using a complex, technical approach that only they can understand.

### *B. Finessing*

Finessing refers to the practice of using clever or manipulative tactics to avoid taking responsibility for one's actions or decisions. This can include tactics such as shifting blame, making excuses, or minimizing the impact of negative outcomes. In general, finessing can refer to the skillful handling of a situation or problem in a way that produces a favorable outcome for an individual or group. The overall goal of finessing being to deflect criticism or avoid consequences by making it seem as though the person(s) in question is not at fault or should not be held responsible. When individuals use finessing to avoid accountability, they may be trying to protect their reputation, position, or power. They may also be attempting to avoid negative consequences, such as criticism, punishment, or loss of status or credibility, since accountability is a critical aspect of effective leadership, decision-making, and problem-solving in Japanese schools. However, what was found in this study was that finessing to avoid accountability is unethical and undermines trust, transparency, and integrity. It can erode relationships, create resentment, and lead to a culture of mistrust and dishonesty in the school community. It also prevents individuals from learning from their mistakes and making improvements for the future. This may be one of the key reasons why most schools that participated in the project (despite their initial enthusiasm to implement change involving all stakeholders in the school), only had one or two teachers attending meetings and completing the required tasks despite the Lead Educator's insistence on having more members of the school actively participate in the project.

### *C. Reifying*

Reifying refers to the process of treating an abstract concept, idea, or theoretical construct as if it were a concrete, tangible object, or entity. In the context of avoiding accountability, reifying can be used to shift responsibility or blame onto something or someone else by treating them as a tangible entity. For example, school leaders might reify its Japanese school culture as a way of avoiding accountability. By treating school culture as a concrete, objective thing, members of the school leadership team can distance itself from any wrongdoing and blame the culture instead. For instance, someone might say "That is just the way things are, going against the grain will only make things worse, and more challenging to implement, so we need to wait" in an attempt to offer a valid justification for their behavior rather than taking responsibility for their actions. Overall, reifying can be problematic because it can obscure the subjective and contextual nature of many abstract concepts and can lead to a false sense of objectivity and certainty about complex and multifaceted phenomena.

## V. Discussion

Jargonizing, finessing, and reifying are all tactics used to avoid accountability, but they differ in their specific approach. Jargonizing involves using technical language or specialized terminology to make something seem more complex or opaque than it actually is. This can be a way of avoiding accountability by making it difficult for others to understand what is being discussed or by hiding the true meaning of what is being said. Jargon can be used to create a sense of expertise or authority that can be used to deflect responsibility or to obscure the real issues. Finessing involves carefully navigating a situation or conversation in order to manipulate the outcome in one's favor. This can be a way of avoiding accountability by presenting a situation in a way that makes it seem more favorable to oneself or by downplaying one's own responsibility for a situation. Finessing can involve careful word choices, strategic omissions, or subtle shifts in tone or body language. Reifying involves treating something abstract or conceptual as if it were a concrete object or thing. This can be a way of avoiding accountability by creating a tangible scapegoat that can be blamed instead of taking responsibility for one's actions. Reifying can involve treating an idea, a process, or a group of people as if they were a single entity, thereby making it easier to deflect responsibility for any negative outcomes. Jargonizing can make it difficult to understand the situation, finessing can manipulate the outcome, and reifying can create a scapegoat. Together they represent an iterative social process that was observed in all of the participating schools.

Avoiding accountability is a common behavior in many cultures and societies around the world, not just in Japanese schools. In Japanese schools, there is a cultural phenomenon known as tatemae and honne, which refers to the practice of maintaining a public facade, or tatemae, while hiding one's true feelings or intentions, known as honne. (Naito, T. & Gielen, U., 1992). This practice is deeply ingrained in Japanese culture and is considered a way of maintaining harmony and avoiding conflict. As a result, when it comes to taking responsibility for one's actions, there is often a reluctance to do so, as admitting fault or making mistakes can be seen as disrupting the harmony of the group. This can lead to a culture of avoiding accountability, where individuals may try to shift blame or avoid taking responsibility for their actions. Additionally, the emphasis on group harmony and avoiding conflict in Japanese culture can also lead to a lack of individual agency and responsibility, where individuals may feel that their actions are a result of the group or situation they are in, rather than their own choices. It is important to note, however, that this behavior is not unique to Japanese culture and can be observed in other cultures as well. However, the unique cultural values and practices in Japan may exacerbate this behavior and make it more prevalent in certain settings, such as schools. It is worth noting however the possibility that the behavior in question may not necessarily be an intentional attempt to avoid accountability, but rather a cultural norm or expectation that emphasizes harmony and avoiding conflict.

The use of specialized language, manipulation of language, or rigid conceptualization of ideas to preserve the current state of affairs is not necessarily seen as an accepted or

desirable trait in effective leadership within Japanese schools. However, when it becomes common practice in schools it can lead to missed opportunities for change, as the language used to discuss and frame issues can limit the potential for new ideas and approaches. By using jargon, finessing language, or reifying concepts, leaders may inadvertently create barriers to understanding and communication, which can result in delays or a lack of progress towards change, which is what was observed happening in the schools that participated in the project. These practices can also contribute to a culture of avoiding responsibility or accountability, as individuals may use language to deflect blame or obscure the true nature of a situation. Effective leadership in Japanese schools should strive to create an open and inclusive environment where ideas are welcomed and discussed openly, without the use of specialized language or manipulation of concepts. This can lead to a more collaborative approach to problem-solving, where all individuals feel empowered to contribute and take ownership of the solutions that are developed.

Leadership that relies on tactics lacking transparency can have detrimental effects on trust and respect within an organization, including within Japanese schools. When leaders are not transparent with their motives, decisions, and actions, it can lead to confusion, mistrust, and a breakdown of communication and cooperation between leaders and followers. Without transparency, individuals may feel excluded from the decision-making process, which can lead to a lack of ownership and investment in the outcomes (Norman, S. M. *et.al*., 2010). Additionally, when individuals do not understand the reasons behind certain actions, it can lead to misunderstandings, resentment, and conflict, which can further erode trust and respect within the organization. In the context of Japanese schools, where group harmony and open communication are valued, a lack of transparency can be particularly damaging to the school community. Leaders should strive to be transparent in their decision-making processes, communicate clearly and openly with their team, and encourage a culture of transparency and openness. This can help to build trust and respect within the school community, fostering a more collaborative and productive learning environment.

## VI. Conclusion

One of the main purposes of the IB's school evaluation process is to encourage schools to become learning organizations where all members of the community are actively engaged in the process of growth, accountability, and transparency. By evaluating schools against rigorous standards and criteria, the IB aims to promote continuous improvement and development within schools (IBO, 2022). This process involves not only assessing the academic quality of the programs offered but also evaluating the school's organizational structures, policies, and culture (IBO, 2018). The IB encourages schools to view the evaluation process as an opportunity for reflection and learning. The process is designed to help schools identify areas for improvement and to provide support and guidance to help them achieve their goals. By promoting a culture of transparency and accountability, the evaluation process also aims to build trust and confidence among stakeholders, including students, parents, and the wider community. By involving all members of the school community in the evaluation process, the IB hopes to create a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for the school's success.

In most of the schools that participated in the project, there was a lack of engagement and involvement among the school community members in the implementation of the IB evaluation process. In many cases, it was primarily the program coordinator who took the lead in the project, while other teachers were left with uncertainty about the project's purpose and how they could contribute. This lack of involvement and engagement among school community members can be problematic as it goes against the intended purpose of the IB evaluation process. The IB encourages schools to view the evaluation process as an opportunity for all members of the community to contribute to the growth and development of the school. When only a few members of the community are involved in the process, the perspectives and expertise of others may be overlooked, which can limit the effectiveness and potential benefits of the evaluation process. Schools with a strong culture of innovation and a willingness to experiment with new practices (Riveras-León, J.C. & Tomàs-Folch, M., 2020) are more likely to be successful at implementing new initiatives, including the implementation of new evaluation processes such as the IB evaluation process. This is because a culture of innovation is characterized by a willingness to take risks, to try new things, and to be open to change. Schools that embrace innovation are likely to be more receptive to new ideas and new approaches to teaching and learning, which can be beneficial when implementing new initiatives like the IB evaluation process.

Developing a culture of innovation in Japanese schools would require a shift in mindset from avoiding conflict to embracing it as a necessary part of growth and progress. The traditional Japanese social norm of avoiding conflict to preserve harmony is known as wa, which can be seen as a fixed mindset that values conformity over individualism and risk-taking (Konishi, E. *et.al*. 2007). In order to promote a culture of innovation, school leaders would need to adopt a growth mindset that views conflict as an opportunity for growth and improvement. This would involve encouraging open communication, promoting critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and creating an environment that values diverse perspectives and encourages experimentation and risk-taking. By embracing conflict as a means to achieve greater harmony, Japanese schools can foster a culture of innovation that will prepare students for the rapidly changing global economy. This will require a willingness to challenge traditional ways of thinking and doing things, and a commitment to ongoing learning and development. Ultimately, the goal should be to create a culture that values creativity, innovation, and continuous improvement, and that empowers students and teachers to reach their full potential.

The emergent theory of savoir faire described in this study, in no way claims to be anything more than what it is, a theory that describes the "relationship between concepts that account for the behaviors seen in the substantive area." (Glaser, 1998, p. 3) It is a description of the social patterns that school leaders particularly exhibited when confronted with the

challenge of engaging the school community in the IB evaluation process. As the number of IB authorized schools in Japan continues to grow, it is important for educators to be able to navigate the complexities of the IB program effectively. The insights gained from this study can help IB practitioners to develop a deeper understanding of the program's goals and values and to identify strategies for implementing it effectively. Moreover, the study's emphasis on the importance of a collaborative and reflective approach to teaching and learning can be particularly beneficial for educators who are new to the IB. By highlighting the value of ongoing professional development and the need to engage in a process of continual learning and improvement, the study can encourage IB practitioners to embrace a growth mindset and to develop the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in their roles as educators, and to develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be a lifelong learner within a global learning community.

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