

Generative Consensus-building as a Basic Social Process: A Classic Grounded Theory of Leading Positive Change in Japanese Schools

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Abstract

This study applies the classic grounded theory methodology of Barney Glaser to identify the fundamental social process by which stakeholders in Japanese schools resolve their primary concern in the face of organizational change. Through constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling, the data revealed a persistent tension: how to maintain organizational harmony within a collectivist culture while simultaneously effecting meaningful change. To account for the way participants resolved this concern, a core category emerged in the form of generative consensus-building. This is a mode of collective decision-making characterized by open dialogue, inclusive participation, and a genuine distribution of autonomy, an exercise in collective intelligence rather than a tool of social control. The theory is structured around a code that unfolds in three recursive phases: preliminary deliberation, structured negotiation, and collective endorsement. These phases can be understood along a spectrum, ranging from a ritualized mode prone to stalling under conditions of hierarchical gatekeeping and pressure to conform, to a generative mode in which the right structural and cultural conditions allow the process to serve as an engine for lasting reform. Consistent with classic grounded theory tenets, the substantive literature was withheld until the core category had emerged. The study offers both a conceptual account of consensus-building in Japanese education and a practical resource for practitioners and policymakers seeking culturally consonant strategies for change.

Keywords: collective decision-making, generative consensus-building, Japanese schools, organizational change, school reform, distributed leadership.

One need look no further than the institutional fabric of Japan to find consensus-building; it is a feature of virtually every layer, rooted in centuries of history and custom (Sugimoto, 2020) and formalised through deliberative practices such as *nemawashi* (the process of building informal consensus before a decision is put forward) and *ringi*, the system of circulating proposals for layered approval (Wolfe, 1992). In the school system this takes the form of a collective approach to decisions. Before any administrative reform can be put in motion or curriculum altered, there must be a thorough negotiation and an airing of a wide range of views on policy. At the same time, the practice has come to be seen as something of a plodding affair, unwieldy and liable to dilute results, a reputation that is not without merit (Kitamura et al., 2019; Okano, 2020). This study would contend, however, that such a view says more about the circumstances in which the process is conducted than the process per se.

Following classic grounded theory as Glaser developed it (Glaser, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the literature review was withheld until the core category had emerged from the data. The logic behind this sequence is straightforward: reviewing the literature first risks importing pre-formed concepts that can distort what participants are actually saying (Glaser, 1998; Nathaniel & Andrews, 2022). The citations woven throughout this manuscript therefore function as additional data entered into constant comparison with the emergent theory, not as scaffolding erected in advance.

The project set out with an open

question regarding how those in Japanese schools go about their primary concern in the face of organizational change. Open coding and comparative analysis made it plain that the issue was one of enacting lasting change without sacrificing the *wa*, or harmony, and the collective accord it demands. What emerged as the core category is *generative consensus-building*. It is not the kind of consensus-building one finds everywhere in Japanese schools, but a specific way of reconciling change and harmony instead of having to choose between them.

This generative consensus-building is the basic social process that ties the theory together (Glaser, 1978). It is a matter of dimension and time, moving through three recursive phases from a ritualized mode that puts the brakes on change to one that is generative in nature. By following the contours of this process, the work provides an example of CGT in an educational context and adds to the picture of how cultural values and the dynamics of organizational change are inextricably linked.

Methodology: Classic Grounded Theory Approach

Classic grounded theory, as Glaser conceived it, is a general methodology for generating conceptual theory from systematically gathered and analyzed data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1998). It is not a form of qualitative description, and it does not set out to verify existing frameworks. Its aim is to discover the basic social process through which participants resolve whatever main concern has surfaced in a given substantive area. This requires a certain discipline: concepts, categories, and



theoretical codes must be allowed to emerge from the data rather than being borrowed from prior literature or imposed through the researcher's assumptions (Glaser, 1992; Andrews, 2024).

Sample and Data Sources

The study was conducted in Japanese school settings with participants directly involved in organizational change processes. Participants were drawn from ten Japanese IB (International Baccalaureate) World Schools and candidate schools (sites where organizational change was actively underway around the adoption and development of the IB programme) spanning the full educational range: three early childhood settings (a PYP nursery school and two PYP kindergartens) a PYP international school, three public prefectural school launching an MYP middle school alongside an established high school that offers or plans to offer the DP, a private PYP/MYP school, and two private DP schools. Participants included principals and heads of school, a vice-principal, leadership team members, IB programme coordinators (PYP, MYP, and DP), classroom teachers, and board of education representatives. Data comprised ongoing meetings and interviews of approximately 40 to 90 minutes each, conducted in person, or online, between July 2025 and June 2026. Meetings were conducted primarily in Japanese, transcribed, and reconstructed as detailed field notes with open codes and analytic memos. Because the researcher was engaged with these schools as an IB programme development consultant, the recorded consultations were themselves naturally occurring decision-making episodes rather than researcher-staged

interviews; consistent with the CGT dictum that all is data (Glaser, 1998), these interactions were treated as data, and the researcher's dual role is acknowledged here and revisited in the limitations. All schools and individuals have been anonymized.

The researcher has put in place the necessary ethical groundwork for this study. This includes having completed the eAPRIN (e-learning Program for Research Ethics) training from the Association for the Promotion of Research Integrity, a course that deals with the responsible conduct and ethical principles of research on human subjects. The design and execution of the work are in keeping with those precepts. Participation for schools in the study was entirely voluntary. All interested participants were provided with an explanation of the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, the expected use of the data, and their rights as participants, including the right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. In the interest of confidentiality, identifying details have been stripped from the material in the course of analysis and transcription, with pseudonyms or other anonymized identifiers put in their place. The data is held in secure storage to which the researcher alone has access.

Identifying the Main Concern

The study entered the field with a broad area of interest—organizational change in Japanese schools—and no predetermined research questions or hypotheses. Data collection began with open



coding: comparing incident with incident across interviews and field observations to identify what was actually preoccupying participants. In CGT, the main concern is whatever emerges as the primary problem in participants' everyday experience of the substantive area (Holton & Walsh, 2016). Following Connor et al. (2024), who define it as the issue participants are continuously working to resolve in the course of their everyday lives, the present study identified the main concern through open coding rather than through any predetermined research question. Across the data, the pattern was consistent: regardless of role or institutional setting, participants returned again and again to the challenge of pursuing change without fracturing the relational fabric of the school. That tension, implementing sustainable change while preserving harmony and collective agreement, was the main concern.

Emergence and Naming of the Core Category

Consensus-building emerged early as the candidate core category: participants across contexts and roles processed their main concern through recognizably similar patterns of collective deliberation. For a category to function as the core in CGT, however, it must carry the highest explanatory weight, account for most of the variation in the data, and speak to what participants actually do (Glaser, 1978, 1998). Successive rounds of memo and concept sorting made clear that consensus-building, unqualified, did not meet the second criterion. Consensus-building is ubiquitous in Japanese schools; its mere presence explains little. What accounted for the greatest variation in

the data was its quality: the difference between consensus-building that enabled durable change and consensus-building that quietly suffocated it.

The core category was therefore named generative consensus-building—the mode of the process in which dialogue is genuinely open, participation is genuinely inclusive, and autonomy is genuinely distributed, and through which participants resolve the tension between change and harmony rather than sacrificing one to the other. Its dimensional counterpart, ritualized consensus-building, names the stigmatized mode in which the same procedural forms are enacted under conditions of conflict avoidance, hierarchical gatekeeping, and conformity pressure, producing the delay and dilution for which consensus-building is conventionally criticized. Naming the core category at this level of specificity preserves what Glaser (1978) calls grab, fit, and imagery: the term points directly at the variation the theory explains.

The Theoretical Code: A Basic Social Process

At the heart of the theory is the basic social process (BSP), a theoretical code for its integration (Glaser, 1978, 2001). Generative consensus-building fits the bill as a BSP by meeting both of the defining criteria. It is processual in nature, with participants recursively moving through three distinct phases over time: preliminary deliberation, then structured negotiation, and finally collective endorsement. These are stages that explain how the main concern comes to be resolved as time goes on.

The theory is also shaped by two

additional relationships. The core category is not static but varies along a dimension from the ritualized to the generative. What determines where an instance of the process lands on this range is a number of conditions: psychological safety, the breadth of stakeholder involvement, how autonomy is distributed, chances for small-scale experimentation and a clear link to student learning. One should not view the conditions, the dimensional range or the phases as separate lists; they are the working components of one cohesive process theory.

Theoretical Sampling and Data Collection

Data collection did not adhere to a set sampling frame. In keeping with the proper conduct of theoretical sampling (Glaser, 1998; Holton & Walsh, 2016), it was guided by the theory as it emerged. Data collection began with school leaders, teachers and programme coordinators in Japanese educational contexts. But as concepts were defined, theoretical sampling would point the way to other sources that could put flesh on the category properties and account for variation.

For instance, early meetings at a school with a long history of running the programme made plain the quiet resistance and stalled change. From there, the researcher was led to seek out contrast cases. This might be a school just opening its doors and without the benefit of routine, in order to see if such patterns are simply a matter of institutional habit. Or a long-authorized institution where the reform has become something of an enclave, to get a full picture of the structural separation and hierarchical gatekeeping. Early childhood environments were included to show how collaboration and

visibility differ from one type of school to another. A school with a rare degree of structural autonomy and a facilitative head was chosen to build out the generative mode, while another in the midst of a complete leadership change offered a chance to examine what allows the process to endure discontinuity. Interviews and observations of decision-making made up the data, every new source selected with the intent to further develop or put a finer point on what was already coming into view.

Constant Comparative Analysis and Coding

Guided by the approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967), constant comparative analysis was at the heart of this study. Open coding began with a thorough review of field notes to draw out initial concepts by comparing one incident to the next. Once patterns became evident, the coding grew more focused on the core category and its properties. Theoretical coding then served to place the categories in relation to one another, showing how the three phases, the conditions, and the dimensional range combined as a social process to address the principal concern. Conceptual ideas that came to light were recorded in memos so as to keep theoretical relationships visible as they developed (Glaser, 1998; Nathaniel, 2023).

Theoretical Saturation and Literature Integration

Data collection and analysis continued until theoretical saturation was reached, that is, until no new dimensions or properties were forthcoming (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Only at that juncture was the substantive literature consulted, and it was

treated as further data for constant comparison (Glaser, 1998; Nathaniel & Andrews, 2022). Engagement with existing scholarship was deliberately withheld until after the core category had emerged, so that the theory could develop on its own terms rather than being predetermined by prior conceptual frameworks. In the findings that follow, all categories and patterns are products of the data; references to existing work in the discussion serve to show where the emergent theory diverges from or builds upon what has previously been written.

Findings

The following presents the substantive theory of generative consensus-building. None of the categories were drawn from the literature or established in advance; all are the result of constant comparative analysis. Organized around the basic social process, the theory first identifies the main concern, followed by the core category and the three phases of the process. The ritualized mode is then examined alongside the three patterns that account for why the process may stall. Finally, the five conditions that, according to the data, propel the process from a ritualized to a generative state along its dimensional range are set out.

The Main Concern: Balancing Change and Harmony

Across the data, participants expressed a version of the same tension: the need to implement meaningful and lasting organizational change all the while maintaining the *wa* (harmony) that makes collective school life function. This concern did not belong to one role or one type of school. Principals, leadership team members,

coordinators, and teachers all returned to it, whether the subject was a modest curriculum tweak or a substantial structural overhaul. The anxiety was consistent: change that disrupts harmony is risky; yet stasis, too, carries its own costs.

At a long-established private school, leaders were explicit that reform arriving as a finished decision would threaten the school's collective identity: "if we just implement what has been decided... we lose what makes us who we are" (「決まったことをやってしまうと...らしさがなくなる」). At another school, a leadership team member described his central dilemma as how to exercise influence without alienating colleagues in an environment where harmony is prized over confrontation; colleagues invoked the school's seventy-five-year history as "evidence" that existing ways worked, so that proposing change felt like negating what the collective had built and protected. Navigating that bind was the central problem participants faced.

The Core Category: Generative Consensus-Building

Generative consensus-building emerged as the process through which participants worked on this bind continuously. The core category has two working parts. The first is its *phasic structure*: the process unfolds through three interconnected phases—preliminary deliberation, structured negotiation, and collective endorsement. Rather than unfolding in a neat sequence, the phases loop back on one another; participants cycle through them recursively rather than moving from start to finish and being done.

The second is its dimensional range: the same three phases can be enacted in a ritualized mode, in which the forms of consensus are observed while its substance is hollowed out, or in a generative mode, in which the process produces genuine collective intelligence and durable commitment. The theory explains what distinguishes the two modes and what moves a school from one toward the other.

The three phases are:

- **Preliminary Deliberation:** Informal conversations through which stakeholders surface concerns and begin building shared goals.
- **Structured Negotiation:** Formal meetings and workshops where divergent perspectives are worked through iterative dialogue and mutual adjustment.
- **Collective Endorsement:** The arrival at a final shared agreement—usually unanimous or nearly so—before any implementation begins.

Preliminary Deliberation

This initial phase is characterized by informal exchange, corridor conversations, small-group discussions, and casual gatherings. Such settings matter because they soften the hierarchical lines of more official interactions, giving participants room to put forward views they might hold back in a formal staff meeting. At one nursery school, for example, leaders noted a shift in tone: as anxieties about the reform subsided, teachers began to share classroom experiences in the staffroom in ways that did not occur in formal meetings, a development taken as a sign that collaboration was becoming part of the daily routine. Field notes from a private secondary school show leaders using deliberately

tentative phrasing, "I think it might be..." (「～かなと思います」) to float proposals or presenting plans as something "we would like to try" (「試してみたいこと」) before seeking any firm commitment.

This pattern is consistent with what has been documented regarding the informal groundwork characteristic of Japanese schools (Saito & Sato, 2012) and the broader observation that pre-decision consultation is an enduring feature of organizational life in Japan (Wolfe, 1992). The purpose of the preliminary phase is not to reach decisions but to bring together a range of viewpoints and cultivate mutual understanding. It is where sensitive issues that are difficult to raise in formal settings tend to surface first; for administrators, it offers an early indication of the concerns on teachers' minds, in a manner consistent with Hamamura's (2012) observations regarding the management of interpersonal risk in collectivist environments.

It is in these preliminary deliberations that shared goals begin to take shape. Staff who feel heard approach subsequent stages with greater trust and a greater willingness to engage openly. There is a relational dimension to this as well: when a teacher's position is acknowledged, trust in the process increases, as does the motivation to invest in it. Preliminary deliberation can also serve as a barometer of a school's readiness for change, revealing pockets of enthusiasm or resistance that inform how later stages are designed. Where the experience is genuinely participatory, teachers come to see themselves as having a hand in the school's direction, laying the cultural groundwork for

the changes that follow.

Structured Negotiation

In this phase, the raw material gathered through preliminary deliberation is made more definite. Senior administrators typically preside over formal meetings in a facilitative capacity, ensuring that diverse perspectives are examined and brought into alignment. The data show that this process frequently unfolded across multiple rounds — a reflection of thoroughness rather than haste, with each round narrowing the range of options in search of common ground. At one PYP international school, whole-staff curriculum sessions served as the primary site for this work: teachers convened to identify overlaps and revise planning documents while leadership provided structure without predetermining outcomes. At another school, leaders used projected documents as shared reference points through which meaning was negotiated across two separate course tracks. The character of this dialogue bears a close resemblance to what has been documented in the context of lesson study reform (Saito & Atencio, 2015).

This phase is as much about how agreement is reached as about the fact of reaching it. A respectful tone is maintained through careful listening, even where genuine disagreement exists. This takes time, but it produces a sense of collective ownership in the outcome that faster processes do not afford, something the literature on distributed leadership identifies as essential to any lasting improvement (Spillane, 2005).

Effective structured negotiation must also attend to the power dynamics that can

otherwise allow institutional authority to dominate. A skilled facilitator ensures that minority perspectives receive appropriate consideration. The phase is considered complete only when practical considerations (feasibility, resources, and timelines) have been weighed against the aspirations put forward, and positions have been translated into what is genuinely achievable.

Collective Endorsement

The deliberative process reaches its formal conclusion with collective endorsement, the moment at which a shared decision is ratified, and the group is free to act. In the schools examined in this study, this typically takes the form of a staff meeting or written declaration that makes the decision official and assigns responsibility for implementation.

The insistence on unanimous or near-unanimous agreement reflects a cultural logic that goes beyond formality. Decisions are understood to carry greater legitimacy and to generate a firmer kind of commitment when it can be assured that no significant voice has been excluded. At one private secondary school, for instance, leaders placed their approval on a three-year plan complete with milestones and designated time for reflection, while leaving the finer details to be determined later. The phrase "the framework is decided; the contents are not yet" (「大枠は決まった／中身は未定」) captured this approach, and by keeping first-year aims modest, the school ensured that momentum was not contingent on immediate results. At another school, where resistance proved difficult to overcome, the leader's strategy was to bring staff to agreement on "just one

thing" (「1 個だけでもいい」) and to record that consent in writing in a low-stakes way that read as support rather than evaluation. Such practices are consistent with what has been documented regarding collective decision-making in Japanese institutional culture (Hamamura, 2012; Saito & Sato, 2012).

The pursuit of unanimity is not without its costs, however. Where consensus is treated as non-negotiable, proposals risk being diluted beyond recognition or decisions deferred indefinitely. The data from the schools in this study suggest that practitioners have developed strategies to navigate this tension, drawing on trial periods and phased rollouts to sustain an inclusive process without sacrificing forward momentum.

When handled well, collective endorsement produces a distinctive form of ownership. Participants who can see their own perspectives reflected in the outcome carry it forward with a sense of purpose and accountability. Beyond the institution itself, the process sends a signal to the wider community (students, parents, and others) about how the school conducts its affairs: with democratic seriousness and in a manner that is transparent and genuinely collaborative. Over time, that reputation becomes woven into the fabric of the school's organisational culture.

Ritualized Consensus-Building: How the Process Stalls

Despite the genuine value described above, consensus-building in Japanese schools has long been a target of criticism, and not without reason. The same features

that make it inclusive can also make it sluggish. In the theory, this stigmatized form is conceptualized as ritualized consensus-building: the mode of the basic social process in which the phases are enacted procedurally while the conditions that give them substance are absent. Three patterns emerged from the data as the defining properties of this mode. Each names a condition under which one or more phases of the process hollows out, and together they explain the delay, dilution, and inertia for which consensus-building is conventionally blamed.

The three patterns are:

- **Fear of Disruption:** The deep prioritization of harmony discourages proposals that might generate friction, often before those proposals have been seriously considered.
- **Over-Reliance on Hierarchical Approval:** Multi-layered sign-off requirements slow implementation and discourage front-line initiative.
- **Pressure to Conform:** Implicit social expectations push staff to align with majority views even when they privately disagree, reinforcing the status quo.

Fear of Disruption

The value of *wa*, or harmony, runs deep in Japanese professional culture. In a school setting this translates into an aversion to open conflict. The data reveal a tendency to water down or set aside any proposal that might provoke disagreement before it has been properly examined. Such filtering is most evident in the early stages of deliberation, where potentially transformative proposals are screened out prior to formal negotiation. Because they

unsettle the status quo, such proposals tend to be viewed as a threat to group cohesion rather than an opportunity for improvement. One member of a leadership team was candid on this point: the PYP had been accepted because it was familiar, but when the next round of reform was raised, the feeling was that it was "too foreign, too much work," and what should have been a one- to two-year candidacy process extended to nearly four years.

Field notes from one school describe teachers operating behind a "closed door" that can only be opened from within. The usual explanations offered for non-participation — "we're busy," "it's difficult", were found to mask a deeper need to protect professional identity. The result is a drift toward the incremental; change that avoids disruption tends not to advance very far. This dynamic is consistent with Hamamura's (2012) work on collectivist harmony and with Edmondson's (1999) observations on how teams assess the interpersonal risk of speaking up.

Reputation compounds the problem. To advance something genuinely novel risks being read as self-promotion or as a slight to tradition, positions few are willing to occupy. Silence follows, and in this environment, silence is taken as consent when it is in fact caution. Left unchallenged, the culture defaults to inaction as the path of least resistance. The data suggest that progress cannot be made through encouragement alone. In schools where headway has been achieved, disagreement has been actively reframed as integral to sound decision-making rather than as a social liability.

Practical measures (facilitation training, structures that surface minority views) have their place, but ultimately it falls to leadership to set the tone. When senior staff demonstrate that they can be challenged without consequence, the cultural equation begins to shift.

Over-Reliance on Hierarchical Approval

The bureaucratic layering characteristic of Japanese schools concentrates authority at the top. While this provides accountability and a degree of stability, it also generates bottlenecks, particularly at the stages of structured negotiation and collective endorsement. Momentum built through dialogue dissipates during the wait for approval from above. A teacher may hold a sound idea but have limited means of advancing it; by the time authorization is granted, the energy behind the proposal has often been lost.

One school in the process of starting their implementation of the IB programme, illustrates this pattern: a board of education representative attended meetings largely as a silent observer, and access to the programme's online platform was restricted to the coordinator and two others. All information had to pass through these gatekeepers. Extending access to the wider staff was a straightforward matter, yet this high-leverage step was consistently deferred in favour of more immediate operational concerns. At another school, a principal's non-response to institutional surveys had become normalized; in the absence of explicit endorsement from above, staff had taken the silence as a signal that participation was optional. By contrast, a principal at a

third school who enjoyed direct access to the board and could act without lengthy procedural approval described this autonomy as what allowed leadership to concentrate on educational development rather than becoming mired in administrative process. This kind of bureaucratic weight is consistent with the centralization of Japanese educational governance that has been critiqued by Tsuneyoshi (2004) and Yokota (2022).

More troubling still is the way hierarchical gatekeeping can erode the shared ownership on which any meaningful reform depends. Where staff experience change as something handed down rather than constructed in concert, a degree of passive resistance is predictable. Teachers comply (at least on paper) but implementation remains thin. The fix is not to dismantle hierarchy but to build in more distributed mechanisms: teacher-led committees, peer review processes, feedback loops that connect classroom experience to strategic planning. These can coexist with accountability structures while reducing the stranglehold that one way communication places on school initiative.

Pressure to Conform

In a tightly knit organization, the line between consensus and groupthink is easily crossed. A dominant view takes hold, and with it comes the social cost of dissent, regardless of what individuals privately think. This is rarely made explicit; it operates through informal cues and the subtle stigmatization of persistent objectors, norms that cast agreement in a positive light and disagreement as a source of trouble. From the

perspective of the theory, this dynamic corrupts structured negotiation from within: meetings are held and views nominally expressed, but self-censorship has already foreclosed genuine deliberation. Field notes from one meeting record the performative compliance of school leaders who had given formal consent to a reform, folded arms, averted eyes, minimal verbal engagement. It was only when the coordinator asked, defensively, "Are all schools actually doing that?" that some privately held skepticism found expression. At another school, leaders were attuned to an unspoken 温度差 (a "temperature difference") in staff commitment to the reform, recognizing that it would manifest as silent non-participation rather than open dissent.

The effects on decision-making are tangible. Social pressure narrows the range of perspectives in play, leaving a conservative set of options on the table. Teachers learn to contain their productive skepticism in order to preserve collegial relationships or avoid being perceived as disruptive, and innovation is among the first casualties, conformity does not create the conditions for the experimentation and productive failure that genuine change requires. These findings resonate with Hashimoto and Maeda's (2021) work on the collegial climate of Japanese schools and with Edmondson's (1999) broader literature on psychological safety.

For genuine dialogue to occur, psychological safety is a prerequisite, a shared understanding that candor will not be penalized. Cultivating this requires deliberate effort: elevating diverse voices in leadership, embedding reflective practices, and

demonstrating through concrete examples how constructive disagreement has in the past produced better outcomes. Where difference is framed as a resource rather than a risk, the conditions for collective intelligence can begin to replace those that sustain conformity.

Shifting the Process Toward the Generative Mode

A case can be made, as this study indicates, that the objections to consensus-building are less about the process per se and more about its ritualized form. There is a difference in kind when such building of consensus is put on display and made participatory through real dialogue; it then becomes an engine for change instead of hindering it.

Five conditions are identified through which the data show the fundamental social process being shifted from a ritualized state to a generative one. These approaches serve to stave off the kinds of stalling patterns noted earlier while reinforcing key phases of the work. For instance, by opening up dialogue and bringing in more stakeholders, one can put some substance back into the preliminary deliberations and the structured negotiations. Allowing for autonomy and action-based learning does much to break the hold of hierarchical gatekeeping. And there is the matter of showing how things affect student learning, which provides the motivational fuel necessary for the recursive cycle to continue.

The five approaches are:

- **Expanding Stakeholder Involvement:** Bringing teachers, students, and parents meaningfully into the process broadens

perspectives and strengthens the legitimacy of outcomes.

- **Promoting Open Dialogue:** Creating conditions where educators can speak honestly without fear of retaliation is foundational to any genuinely participatory process.
- **Encouraging Autonomy and Belonging:** Involving teachers in decisions that affect their work builds ownership and intrinsic motivation.
- **Implementing Action-Based Learning:** Small-scale experimentation, with real-time feedback and structured reflection, allows schools to move forward without waiting for perfect consensus.
- **Demonstrating Impact on Student Learning:** Connecting teacher effort to visible student outcomes sustains motivation and gives consensus-building a clear sense of purpose.

Expanding Stakeholder Involvement

The quality of decision-making improves when it draws on a broader range of voices, and the resulting choices are ones to which more participants can genuinely commit. The data bear this out: town-hall meetings, cross-functional task forces, and student advisory panels do more than satisfy procedural requirements. They alter the composition of intelligence brought to bear on a given question and expand the circle of those whose perspectives are heard — a dynamic that in turn offsets the conformist pressures that tend to narrow the range of options under consideration.

At one small school where the reform programme had been reduced to an enclave within a single area of study, the initial step



taken was to open programme platform accounts to the entire staff, so that every teacher could be regarded as part of the reform community on the basis of the school's accreditation. An invitation was also extended to the various course communities — from athletics to the arts — to articulate the programme's aims in their own terms. At a nursery school, monthly Open Class sessions brought teachers from other classes in to observe, hear unit explanations, and exchange views with colleagues they might not otherwise have engaged. Such mechanisms serve as a necessary counterweight to the insularity that can take hold in a tightly administered institution.

For any of this to carry weight, however, it must amount to more than the symbolic. Where participants can identify their own contributions in the decisions that follow, the incentive to remain engaged is self-evident. This pattern is consistent with the literature on professional learning communities (Stoll et al., 2006) and with recent case work on inclusive leadership in Japanese school contexts (Yada et al., 2025).

Promoting Open Dialogue

One might be tempted to view psychological safety as a cultural nicety or some luxury, but in truth it is a structural necessity. It is the surest way to put an end to the fear of disruption and the urge to conform, and it is what makes for genuine consensus-building. In its absence, so-called collective deliberation tends to be little more than a managed performance. Cultivating this kind of environment takes deliberate effort. There are structures to be put in place: open-door policies, peer coaching and making room in

regular meetings for unvarnished conversation. Facilitation training is of use here. But leadership conduct is perhaps most telling. When school leaders are willing to air their own uncertainties, put out feelers for real pushback and take criticism without becoming defensive, they set the standard for the rest of the staff. The idea is consistent with the protective role of a collegial climate as seen in Japanese schools (Hashimoto & Maeda, 2021) and with the work Edmondson (1999) did on team psychological safety.

Encouraging Autonomy and Belonging

There is a direct link between a teacher's willingness to put in the effort on an outcome and having real input into the decisions that govern his or her work. In this respect, autonomy and belonging are mutually reinforcing. A sense of community built on trust in one's professional judgment will see people more ready to take the initiative and partake in the collective process, rather than waiting for some form of hierarchical sign-off to get things moving. One way to put this into practice is through professional learning communities. These are environments where teachers can pool their efforts to find solutions, put forward what has been effective in the classroom and examine the evidence of student learning, all while their individual voice is given due weight (Stoll et al., 2006). The underlying motivation for such an approach aligns well with self-determination theory and its view of autonomy and relatedness as fundamental psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Implementing Action-Based Learning

A productive way to break the paralysis of protracted consensus processes is





to implement action-based learning through the small-scale piloting of ideas. The data shows that when schools run limited experiments and take in real data, they can make practical headway with structured reflection while leaving room to revise outcomes; this makes any collective endorsement provisional instead of final. At one kindergarten, the intervention was kept deliberately small: a single unit was reworked from the ground up each term to put some genuine uncertainty back into teaching, and an unscripted moment of authentic choice for the child was put into what would otherwise be a highly scripted event. In another school where resistance was widespread, the leader put forward a case for one minor change of their own choosing. Were this not to occur, the question of why the change could not be enacted was to be treated as diagnostic information for future support, not as a matter for blame. Such an approach is in keeping with grounded theory logic. It is better to let strategies evolve from what is happening than to wait for a plan that is theoretically sound. When teachers are part of action research or design thinking, they are co-authors of improvement at the school level, not just its subjects, and that is a fundamental shift in how reform is viewed. One can see the same pattern in the lesson-study work of Japanese schools (Saito & Sato, 2012; Saito et al., 2015) with their iterative, evidence-based method of making things better.

Demonstrating Impact on Student Learning

There is no more lasting incentive for undertaking the rigours of a deliberative process than witnessing its real-world output.

For teachers, the ability to draw a direct line between their role in building consensus and measurable gains in student achievement or engagement makes the case for that kind of sustained effort concrete and compelling. This pattern was evident in the data at one school where planning had stalled until leaders made a deliberate shift: rather than documenting procedure, they began presenting observable evidence of what students were learning, accompanied by success criteria that allowed incremental progress to be tracked and recognized. At another institution, the expectation that students would produce visible projects served both to confer legitimacy on the reform effort and to cultivate a broader sense of pride within the school community.

To sustain such an environment, schools require systems for the collection and dissemination of impact data (whether assessment figures, feedback, or student work) in forms that are genuinely informative rather than merely bureaucratic. Incorporating student voice into this process is a further means of closing the loop between effort and outcome. Taking time to mark the connections between collective work and its results, recognizing small victories alongside larger ones, reinforces the communal spirit on which meaningful consensus-building depends. The motivational dynamic underlying these practices is consistent with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and with what has been documented in collaborative reform efforts in comparable contexts (Saito et al., 2015).

Discussion and Implications

There is a certain tension in the results.



While they are in keeping with what has been written before, they also run counter to the way consensus-building is typically portrayed in the educational change literature. This study indicates that one should not fault consensus-driven processes per se; the issue lies in their ritualized form, which takes hold where there is little transparency or where social pressure and hierarchical constraints are at play (Tsuneyoshi, 2004; Yokota, 2022). Alter those conditions and the process will alter as well: the very same three phases that lead to dilution and delay in a ritualized setting can be the source of durable commitment and collective intelligence when the environment is more generative.

What this means for school leadership is clear from the data. The schools that have made the most of their consensus-building efforts are those with leaders who act as facilitators and architects of dialogue instead of simply making authoritative calls. Such an approach is something of a departure from the job description that has long been the norm in Japanese school administration (Yokota, 2022; Spillane & Diamond, 2016). After all, inclusive planning committees, peer feedback systems and professional learning communities do not maintain themselves; they require a sponsor. It is the leader who puts in place and defends these structures that allows for the kind of collective intelligence to function.

Then there is the matter of professional development. One cannot be expected to intuitively possess the skills for generative consensus-building, be it conflict navigation, evidence-informed dialogue or reflective practice. These must be put into

deliberate practice. Teachers will come by the disposition and skill to make meaningful contributions to school-wide decisions if such development is part of the culture of consensus-building rather than some separate training exercise. There is a dynamic at work here that self-determination theory would recognize: when a teacher sees his or her input shaping the outcome, motivation and ownership are the natural result (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

At a higher level, it is up to educational authorities and policymakers to determine whether the environment for school-level consensus is one of stagnation or of growth. By removing bureaucratic impediments and offering greater institutional autonomy, they can extend an enabling environment well beyond the school. When policies regard community engagement and the voice of the teacher as real inputs and not just matters of compliance, it makes for a different kind of democratic leadership in practice (Spillane, 2005; Spillane & Diamond, 2016).

The relevance of these findings is not confined to Japan. In collectivist societies elsewhere, reformers have been quick to decry the slow pace of consensus-driven institutions, often bringing with them assumptions drawn from more individualist contexts. The present research suggests that such a critique misidentifies the problem. The capacity for resilient and inclusive transformation is present in these settings; what is required is the right combination of openness, tolerance for experimentation, and distributed leadership to realize it. Future research might be expected to trace these



dynamics across other school contexts and contribute to the growing body of scholarship on culturally responsive educational leadership (Andrews, 2024; Glaser, 1998).

Limitations

These implications must be read alongside several limitations that bear on the scope and transferability of the theory. First, as a substantive grounded theory, generative consensus-building is grounded in (and its fit is claimed for) the particular substantive area studied: organizational change in Japanese schools. More specifically, all ten participating schools were IB World Schools, so the theory is grounded in consensus-building around one particular type of reform, the adoption and development of an externally framed international programme. Its fit with other kinds of organizational change in Japanese schools, and its extension to other institutional or national contexts, is a matter of modifiability through further constant comparison, not of statistical generalization (Glaser, 1998). Second, the sample, while directed by theoretical sampling rather than representativeness, was drawn from a small number of schools and was weighted toward school leaders and programme coordinators; the perspectives of rank-and-file teachers (particularly those most resistant to change) were represented chiefly through leaders' accounts, and students, parents, and policymakers were represented only indirectly. Third, decision-making processes were observed and recounted within particular timeframes; longer longitudinal engagement might reveal additional properties of the process, particularly around how schools sustain the

generative mode over years rather than months. Fourth, the researcher's dual role as programme development consultant and observer shaped the interactions studied, in several meetings the researcher was a substantial contributor to the talk, and field notes were reconstructed from memory, which limits verbatim precision. Finally, in CGT the researcher is the instrument of conceptualization; although constant comparison, memoing, and theoretical sampling discipline the analysis, the theory remains one plausible conceptual account of the data, open (as all grounded theories are) to modification as new data emerge.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evidence presented in this study makes a case for rethinking consensus-building in Japanese schools. It is neither an antiquated cultural form nor an inefficient mode of operation; rather, it is a dynamic process with the capacity to drive sustainable change. The application of classic grounded theory methodology has enabled this research to put forward the theory of generative consensus-building. As a basic social process, it moves through three recursive phases and may be located anywhere along a spectrum from the ritualized to the generative, depending on the structural and cultural conditions in which it operates. In its generative mode, it produces what more directive and expeditious approaches often fail to achieve: a sense of shared ownership and the kind of organizational trust that lends legitimacy to change and ensures that change endures.

The common criticisms of consensus-building (that it is slow, prone to conformity,



or susceptible to bureaucratic capture) are not without foundation. Yet such critiques are typically directed at the ritualized version of the process, which is a product of poor implementation rather than an inherent defect of the approach itself. Where open dialogue and a genuine distribution of autonomy are present, consensus-building ceases to function as an instrument of social control and becomes one of collective intelligence. The core category articulated in this study speaks directly to that distinction.

It falls to policy and leadership to create the conditions for this. A leader who functions as co-learner and facilitator as much as manager will put in place the participatory structures that give consensus-building momentum rather than diminishing it. Equally, a policy environment less committed to rigid hierarchies and more

supportive of participatory governance enables schools to be both equitable and responsive to the needs of their communities.

Ultimately, this study calls for a reframing of the issue. For educators committed to change, consensus-building should not be regarded as an obstacle to be circumvented but as the very medium through which change becomes feasible in a collectivist institutional culture. There is no need to abandon the cultural values that inform the process in order to make it more visible and empowering; what is required is the construction of conditions that are worthy of those values. The schools in this study that have achieved this exhibit a form of leadership that is both contextually grounded and genuinely shared, offering lessons for the broader field of educational change that have yet to be fully appreciated.

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