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## Comparative Perspectives on Educational Assessment System at Primary Schools in Japan and Iran

**ABSTRACT:** *The comparison of different dimensions of successful and unsuccessful educational system is a popular trend among educational researchers in developing countries. The educational success of Japanese students in international examinations has triggered many researchers all around the world to pay attention to the role of educational system of this country. In the meanwhile, Asian countries have a feeling of closeness to Japan and think they can follow the footsteps of Japan as an ideal model. In Iran and over the last two decades, the Japanese model of education has drawn the attention of researchers involved in education. This interest toward Japan stems from these facts: (1) Japan is an Eastern country and abides by its cultural and traditional system; and (2) Japan's educational advancement. In addition, Iranian researchers pay particular attention to Japan's primary school period as the most fundamental stage because international surveys, such as TiMSS (Trend in Mathematics and Science Study) reveals that Iranian primary school pupils do poorly on the math and science exams. One of the reasons of such poor results is the weakness of educational assessment system of Iran. The present article attempts to look at the evaluation system in both countries from a comparative perspective. In the first part, the reasons for the comparison are clarified. In the second part, an overview of the two countries educational system is presented. Part three elucidates common evaluation methods in two countries. In the end, we conclude with a comparative outlook to some of the similarities and differences between Japan and Iran.*

**KEY WORDS:** *The comparison, educational system, Japan and Iran, model of education, similarities and differences, and the math and science exams.*

### INTRODUCTION

Structure of research in the field of comparative education is based upon understanding others through the educational system. This understanding, as M. Sadler (1964) points out, is a major step toward understanding oneself. This fact is even accepted in countries like Iran and UK (United Kingdom), which have commonly an introspective view of themselves. For example, in England, during the mid-1990s, the government's Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) commissioned a review of comparative studies of educational achievement. The report commenced by observing that:

We live in a world that is becoming "smaller" all the time. The spread of mass communications, and particularly of satellite broadcasting, makes ideas that were formerly found only in isolated cultural niches globally available. The enhanced interactions between citizens of different countries through visits, vacations, migrations, and electronic contact are clearly both breaking down cultural barriers and yet, at the same time, also leading to a reassertion of cultural distinctiveness. The educational world is also becoming "smaller" all the time (Reynolds & Farrell, 1996:3).

Belief in global village and the scope of teaching and learning becoming smaller have eliminated comparative researchers past worries. However, despite so many cultural and geographical differences between UK

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**Figure 1:**  
 Points of Convergence in Different Settings for Japan and Iran

Japan		Iran
<i>Aspect:</i> Because of Japan's geographical condition, racial, cultural, and religious unity over the past centuries, there is a solid social structure among people.	Demography and educational consequences	<i>Aspect:</i> Three-fourth of Iranian are Persian and the rest are Turks, Kurds, Arabs, and Lors. About 90% are Shiite, 7% are Sunnis, and the rest are Christians, Zoroastrian, and Jews. Farsi is the national language, but other languages like Arabic are also spoken in some parts of the country.
<i>Response:</i> Centuries of intermarriage and racial and cultural mixing have shaped the Japanese population. A more unified and distinctly Japanese "race" has emerged as a result.		<i>Response:</i> Despite racial and religious differences, there is a unified educational system for all parts of the country. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, there is an emphasis on religion in schools teachings but religious minorities have their own schools.
<i>Consequence:</i> Although there is no clear indication of differences in access to educational opportunities, the economic gap shows that the rich have more access to better schools and universities.	How have attributes of the population affected education?	<i>Consequence:</i> Despite racial differences, there is a common feeling of "being an Iranian" among all the people. However, religious and language differences along with economic gap have caused some parts of the country to have better access to educational opportunities.

(United Kingdom) and the Far East countries, the above mentioned committee emphasizes on studying the educational systems in countries, such as Japan and South Korea (Crossley & Watson, 2003; and Davies, 2004). Therefore, choosing a country as the "unit of analysis" is the major feature of comparative studies, but as Mark Bray points out:

A prerequisite for any comparative study is to establish the parameters for initial comparability of the chosen units of analysis. In general, instructive analysis can be made when the units for comparison have sufficient in common to make analysis of their differences meaningful (Bray, 2004:248).

Thus, rather than a mechanical identification of similarities and differences between two or more places, it is suggested that attention be paid to the underlying context of these commonalities and differences, and to their causal relevance to the educational phenomenon being examined. In other words, any meaningful comparative study should be able to identify the extent and the reasons for commonalities and differences between the units of comparison, examining the causes at work, and the relationships between those causes.

P.K. Kubow & P.R. Fossum (2003) provided a useful tool with "boxed" juxtapositions

of comparisons of featured countries with respect to demographic, geophysical, and socio-political factors shaping education. With regards to present paper, and based on P.K. Kubow & P.R. Fossum (2003), figure 1 is drawn for Japan and Iran.

With regard to the findings of the figure 1, some similarities and differences between Japan and Iran could be found. These common grounds can assist us in explaining the assessment system of education in both countries. It is obvious that Japan's educational system, over the last two decades, has got much attention from those who are involved in education. In the meanwhile, Iranian feel to have commonalities with Japan's social setting. Both countries enjoy a rich cultural and historical background over the past centuries.

The geographical position of Iran in contrast to Japan has caused much cultural exchanges with other nations. However, in both countries, customs, traditions, cultural, and religious rituals are still very common and prevalent. On the other hand, unlike Japanese, Iranians have not been able to find a way to reconcile traditions with modernism. Therefore, one of the reasons for Iranian's attraction to Japan can be found in the way Iranian have understood to learn from Japan's educational system.

**Table 1:**  
Standard Annual “Teaching Hours” (45 Minutes) in Primary Schools

Curriculum Area and Number of Teaching Hours	Year 1 6-7 yrs	Year 2 7-8 yrs	Year 3 8-9 yrs	Year 4 9-10 yrs	Year 5 10-11 yrs	Year 6 11-12 yrs
<i>Compulsory Subjects:</i>						
Japanese Language	306	315	280	280	210	210
Social Studies	--	--	105	105	105	105
Arithmetic/Mathematics	136	175	175	175	175	175
Science	--	--	105	105	105	105
Living Experience	102	105	--	--	--	--
Music	68	70	70	70	70	70
Art (Drawing and Handicrafts)	68	70	70	70	70	70
Home Economics	--	--	--	--	70	70
Physical Education	102	105	105	105	105	105
Moral Education	34	35	35	35	35	35
Special Activities	34	35	35	35	35	35
<b>Total</b>	<b>850</b>	<b>910</b>	<b>980</b>	<b>1,015</b>	<b>1,015</b>	<b>1,015</b>

Source: MoE [Ministry of Education] (2004).

On the other hand, differences between the two countries can affect educational borrowing. From the geographical points of view, Iran is vaster than Japan and its population is double as much less than this country. Also, the ethnic-religious and linguistic varieties are more profound than Japan. Despite these differences, educational experts in Iran believe that similarities between Iran and Japan are more than similarities between Iran and any European country. In the past, Iran adopted the France’s educational system. Some believe that we would have been more successful if we had adopted the Japanese model of education.

**PRIMARY EDUCATION IN JAPAN**

The culture of education in Japan is based on Shinto, Buddhism, and Confucianism philosophy. Buddhism was introduced to Japan during the sixth century; at the same century, Japanese had been introduced with Chinese writing and literature (Passin, 1965). Chinese philosophy and literature had influenced history of Japan. According to these philosophies’ learning and study are the main tools of personal and social improvement, consequently had respect and honor in the Japanese society (Aso & Amano, 1972). Therefore, educational achievements of Japanese pupils and students influence their

social and economic status very much.

The education system of Japan was formed for the first time after Taiho Constitution in the 701. This constitution was a base of Japanese law till the Meiji Restoration (1868). The Meiji Restoration period was very important and had innovations not just in social life, but in educational system too. The main specialties of this time were learning different education systems, inviting foreign specialists, and departure Japanese specialists to the Europe countries to research their education (Lincicome, 1995).

Three big reforms in educational system have been done at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first was done in 1872, the second was done after World War II in 1947, and the third after 1987. The purposes of the reform in 1987 were to pay maximum attention to individuality of every student, to make long life education, to internationalize education, to create modern education, computerization of schools, and spread of English learning (Kydyralieva, 2010).

Apart from the philosophical characteristics of education system in Japan, we can deal with some features of its elementary education system. In Japan, primary schools begin at the age of 6. This period is 6 years, and it is mandatory and free of charge. Since 1992, the educational syllabus is covered in 5 days of

**Table 2:**  
 Primary School Schedule

Grade	Hours per Week	Weeks per Year	Total Number of Hours	Course Title
1	24	32	768	Spelling; Composition; Social Education;
2	24	32	768	Religious Teaching; Holy Koran; Persian (Reading,
3	28	32	896	Grammar); Physical Education; Art (Drawing,
4	28	32	896	Handicraft, Calligraphy); Science; and Mathematic.
5	28	32	896	

Source: MoE [Ministry of Education] (2004).

class time per week. A considerable amount of teacher's time is spent on organizing field trips, participating in sports festivals, and also orientation and graduation ceremonies.

The academic year is 35 weeks and the class time is 45 minutes. Schools starts at 8:30 A.M. and finish at 3:50 P.M. More than 2 hours is spent on breaks, lunch, and cleaning of classes and corridors. Books are not quite unique and local committees in consultation with teachers' representatives compile books for every grade and progress to higher grades is automatic.

Table 1 shows subjects matters from 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

### PRIMARY EDUCATION IN IRAN

Until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, formal education in Iran was almost entirely provided by the Islamic *Maktab*, private schools associated with a mosque and supported by contributions of the wealthy faithful. However, in 1848, and twenty years before Meiji Restoration (1868) in Japan, Amir Kabir, the Prime Minister of Iran and a royal advisor, started a government-supported polytechnic in accordance with the European model to be located in Tehran.

In 1925, while the last Qajar King was in Europe, a parliament composed of Reza Khan's men deposed the Qajar dynasty and recognized him as Reza Shah, the first Pahlavi. His reign in Iran was contemporaneous with Ataturk in Turkey. Reza Shah had almost the same objectives regarding education as Ataturk did. He established the secular primary and secondary school systems in Iran. The years since the end of World War II have seen the establishment of a number of new schools and universities (Sadigh, 1974).

In 1941, at the beginning of the World War

II, Reza Shah moved close to the Germans, in spite of initial British support. As a result, allied forces occupied Iran and the Shah abdicated in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Shah. However, the Islamic revolution that toppled Shah in 1979 steered the nation's education system in a new direction. The organization of the education system in Iran is highly centralized. The ministry of education administers and finances schools at the primary and secondary level (Arani & Abbasi, 2008).

Primary education is a five-year programme which provides students with basic knowledge and skills, as shown in table 2.

Primary school is 5 years and pupils range from 5 to 11 years old. This period is compulsory and free of charge. Classes are held 6 days in a week and everyday school time is from 7:30 A.M. to 12:30 P.M., although in some parts of country start and finish time can vary according to number of pupils and class availability.

Based on regulations, teachers must be at schools for 40 hours per week; but in practice, it does not happen and usually they leave schools after they finish their classes. Each teacher has to teach 24 hours in a week. Most of teacher's time is spent on organizing class, teaching, and correcting quiz or exam papers. Academic year is 32 weeks and each class lasts 45 minutes.

In practice, the presence of pupils at schools can vary according to harsh climate conditions and religious or political occasions which can lead to the one-day shut-down of schools. Textbooks are unique and are developed for all boys and girls all around the country without any consideration of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences. The Ministry of

Education is responsible for textbook design and development. Going to higher grades depends on success in final exams.

### **EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT SYSTEM AT PRIMARY SCHOOL**

In Japan, the assessment of educational achievement at primary school is task-based and not-based on scores. There is no final examination for going from one grade to the next. In this view of assessment, three points are emphasized: (1) efficiency and usefulness of teaching-learning system; (2) reflection of student's abilities and capacities; and (3) quantitative and qualitative record of results in the report card [scores obtained from every subject matter, results of special activities, and record of events which calls for counseling, records of roll-calling].

The record of results in the report card for each subject matter is in the shape of absolute criterion (what must be learned) and norm-referenced methods with the teacher's opinion about student's individual abilities. There is a formative and continuous method of assessment at work. There is also an emphasis on student's self-assessment (Sarkar Arani, 2001).

In 1990s, Japan reformed its educational system and focused on a revised syllabus which is less strict and more lenient and emphasizes on individual's independent thinking. Moreover, Japan's educational system is central and reformative and insists on growth and development as the prerequisite for the success of citizens. Qualitative continuous assessment and its feed-back to parents have helped the progress of Japan's educational system.

Research shows that the success of primary schools in Japan stems from three sources: the feeling of belonging to schools, development of whole person, and appropriate content (Lewis & Tsuchida, 1997). Since 2002, with the slogan of "less is much", Japanese have reduced about 30 per cent of teaching hours and textbook contents at primary schools in order to provide opportunities for learning and can enjoyable chance at school.

At Iranian primary schools, assessment of educational activities is the teacher's responsibility, which is done for the active involvement of students in teaching-learning

process. Continuous and formative assessments are common. Continuous assessment is based on pupil's participation in learning activities, such as homework completion, class questions, and out of class activities. Feedback is given through sending a report card to parents.

Exams are conducted in written, oral, and hands-on ways based on the type and nature of the subject matter. Written exams are the most common of all three methods. Pupils' scores are recorded in special books. The passing score is 10 out of 20. Getting the passing score is the ultimate requirement for moving on to higher grade levels. At the end of primary period (fifth grade), exams are designed and administrated nation-wide. As of academic year of 2002-2003, based on the directive of the supreme committee of educational system and with the aim of working fundamental changes in assessment methods, qualitative assessment trial project was piloted at some primary schools (omission of 0-20 band score for 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade pupils).

Currently, after three years of piloting, this project is extended to all the primary schools in the country. The emphasis here is on changing quantitative to qualitative assessment and replacing summative with formative evaluation (Hasani, 2005). According to this method, weak and strong points of pupils are investigated based on their portfolio, which is a report of all their abilities, skills, and attitudes (Moghanizade, 2001).

Recent surveys reveal that under this project, there has been less exam stress, improved learning, increased parents satisfaction, less failing, and grade repetition. On the down side of the project, there are factors, such as: teachers, pupils and parents' habit to scoring system, too much content, teacher's lack of familiarity with the project and time-consuming qualitative assessment. It is obvious that the project was in trial phase and was administered in a few schools. Further investigation by the researchers emphasizes on a step by step implementation of the project throughout the whole country (Khoshkholgh & Sharifi, 2007).

### **COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE**

In light of previous sections of the article, some points of similarity and dissimilarity

**Table 3:**  
 An Overview of Principles, Tools, and Assessment Domains at Primary Schools in Japan and Iran

Country	Type of Educational System	Assessment Domains	Assessment Tools	Principles
Japan	Central reformist	Concentrate on affective, cognitive, and psycho-motor domains	Teacher-made tests, standardized tests, observation, and self-assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluation of teaching-learning usefulness</li> <li>Measurement of pupils abilities</li> <li>Information about physical conditions and educational achievement</li> <li>Gathering information about successes</li> </ul>
Iran	Central leaning toward delegation of power	Concentrate on cognitive domain	Teacher made tests, standardized tests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Giving information about pupils educational progress to their parents</li> <li>Providing proper conditions for promoting pupils to higher levels</li> <li>Determining pupils weak points and eliminating them</li> </ul>

**Table 4:**  
 Some Innovations in Assessment of Educational Achievement in Japan and Iran

Country	Types of Assessment Based on Subject Matter	Types of Assessment Based on Objective	Assessment Innovations
Japan	Written, Oral, and Practical	Formative Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Omission of final exams</li> <li>Attention to individual differences</li> <li>Preparing portfolios for each pupil</li> <li>Self- assessment techniques</li> <li>Critical questions for improving educational activities</li> <li>Observing pupils behavior</li> </ul>
Iran	Written, Oral, and Practical	Continuous Final Exams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of questions bank in final exams</li> <li>Change of quantitative scale of 0-20 to ranking scales</li> <li>Omission of scoring from 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade of primary school</li> </ul>

between Japan and Iran's evaluation of education achievement at primary schools can be identified. The age of entry to primary school in both countries is 6 and this period is compulsory and free of charge. The length of this period is 6 and 5 years in Japan and Iran respectively. See table 3 and 4.

From the view point of organizational structure, the decision-making role in both countries is played by Ministry of Education (in both countries Ministry of Education has main responsibilities for decision-making). Although it must be admitted that over the last two decades in Iran, there has been an increase in the trend of hand-over of school management to private sector, but this matter

is limited to financial issues. As far as teacher recruitment, text-book development, and school management are concerned; there are huge differences between the two countries which necessitate the attention of Iranian policy-makers to Japanese experiences.

From assessment standpoint, the examination, according to regulations, consists of four types of exam, but close observations show that not all the four types are utilized properly. Summative assessment is utilized for students ranking and grade promotion. Formative assessment is utilized for scoring exams. Entrance assessment is hardly ever utilized. The stark contrast is in different views of assessment of educational achievement

between the two countries.

In Japan, assessment is viewed as a tool for providing feed-back and creating motivation for learning, and it is also task-based. In Iran, assessment is looked upon as a tool for showing schools functionality and also pupil's success. Another difference is in how results are reflected in the report card. In Japan, the results are reflected both qualitatively and quantitatively. In Japan, qualitative results are reported in the form of description of strong points, physical conditions, social and behavioral descriptions, extracurricular activities, and general suggestions for every pupil. Also, with reference to figure 1, it can be stated that in Japan assessment is quite flexible with regard to regional differences.

On the contrary, in Iran, there is only one book for all the country. Text-books do not take into account pupils' gender, linguistic, ethnic, religious, cultural, and economical differences. As a result, exam questions are the same all around the country and are not based on a deep understanding of environmental realities. Therefore, research findings show that in primary school period, the content of text-books are not in line with most of pupils' mental abilities, and they are forced into memorizing such contents (Ahghar, 2004).

The comparison of different dimensions of successful and unsuccessful educational system is a popular trend among educational researchers in developing countries. Some countries like Japan, Singapore, and South Korea are getting the attention of educational policy makers in Iran. The main reason for such modeling adoption is the history of previous borrowing from Western countries educational systems. The formal educational system in Iran dates back to 100 years ago. In the beginning, Iran adopted the France's educational system. After the 1979 Islamic revolution, most experts were of the opinion that such adoption was completely wrong on the basis of deep social differences between Iran and France.

Therefore, in an obvious U-turn, they veered off from West and steered toward East. Educational and economic advances and also being an Eastern country are the main reasons for adopting and borrowing Japanese

models. Over the past two decades, there have been much research about Japan's educational system in Iran. As such, the period before the revolution can be dubbed "Westernization" and the time period after the revolution can be labeled "Japanization".

Most researchs have emphasized the superiority of Japan. This is quite evident in the present article. In fact, current data shows the great gap between Iran and Japan in international arenas. For example, in TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) of 2007, average mathematics scores of Japanese fourth grade students is 568 compared to 402 in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Also, national findings of TIMSS and PERLS (Practical Extraction and Report Language Study) reveal that Iran's position and performance in 1995, 1999, 2003, and 2007 for TIMSS; and 2001 and 2006 for PERLS have always been below the international performance in a significant way.

Also, TIMSS findings in 2003 shows poor results of Iranian primary school children in science exams and a lower quality of this subject matter compared to international standards. In a performance test, Iranian pupils had a good performance in understanding and memorizing, but they were much weaker in theorizing, analyzing, problem-solving, and use of scientific methods (Martin *et al.*, 2004).

National research has also created much concern about the teaching of sciences in primary schools. The findings reveal that educational methods are not proportionate to text-book contents and are not applied to all schools; and that in most schools conventional assessment and educational methods are being applied in Japan national center for educational assessment continuously controls educational programs in teaching sciences in all grades (*cf* Ahmadi, 2003; and Farshad, 2003). Also, in this country, formative assessment is used realistically in line with pre-defined objectives (O'Donnell, 2004).

In contrast, in Iran, only teacher-made tests are used and consequently lots of educational objectives are not tapped into. In Iran, qualitative assessment is used only in first, second, and third levels of primary schools; whereas, Japan is among progressive

countries in this regard. From an educational point of view, the main reason behind Iranian pupil's failure in international exams is the common assessment methods of educational achievement.

In fact, assessment and evaluation in Iran, which are administered by government institutions and most teachers, includes only summative assessment. Over-emphasizing an objective that is, learning a huge amount of content students must achieve, is quite bothersome. One of the outcomes of this issue is pupils and their anxiety and stress on the one hand and lack of opportunity for engaging in other valuable educational goals and objectives on the other hand (Dadsetan & Daneshpajuh, 1995; and Khalkhali, 1995).

Moreover, researchers such as H. Pashasharifi & A. Kiamenesh (1990); H. Elhampur (1996); and S. Moshavi (1996), in an analysis of the exam contents, have concluded that questions are mostly about the knowledge level and do not cover higher order notions, such as analysis and synthesis. A natural consequence of this is the widening of educational gap between developing and developed countries.

## CONCLUSION

In the end, with a comparative perspective, a general conclusion can be reached. Firstly, social and cultural differences between Japan and Iran are as much as differences between France and Iran. Secondly, from a cultural standpoint, similarities between Japan and Iran are more than similarities between France and Japan. Japan and Iran are both Eastern countries with people who believe in traditions. Geographical vastness, abundant natural resources, and less population give Iran superiority over Japan. As far as economy is concerned, Japan is in the hay days of its prosperity, whereas Iran has not been able to materialize its full potentials.

From a political point of view, after the II World War (1939-1945), Japan is experiencing a calm period, whereas Iran has been in the center of the Middle-East conflicts. Political problems permitting, Iran enjoys rich human resources that can be drawn on in exploiting the Japanese model. Some educational reforms

are dependent on cultural teachings. Common teachings in Japan are based on beliefs in order, law, and social preferences to individual ones.

We believe that using Japan's educational model entails drawing on social and cultural models. The experience of following other countries models has shown that for example the application of qualitative assessment in Iranian schools is not enough. Iranian teachers and students alter qualitative assessment methods with their culture. Therefore, what has been successful in Japan may not be successful in Iran. Iranians are creative people, if politic and economy permit.

We even cook pasta which is an Italian food according to our own taste and style of cooking. The Iranian positive view of Japan can be a good opportunity for primary education experts to utilize on Japan's experiences without getting involved in the old conflict between tradition and modernism, or making these experiences "Iranized".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>**Statement:** We would like to declare that this article is our original work; so, it is not product of plagiarism and not yet also be reviewed and published by other scholarly journals.



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**The Elementary School Students in Iran and Japan**  
(Source: [www.google.com](http://www.google.com), 24/10/2014)

We believe that using Japan's educational model entails drawing on social and cultural models. The experience of following other countries models has shown that for example the application of qualitative assessment in Iranian schools is not enough. Iranian teachers and students alter qualitative assessment methods with their culture. Therefore, what has been successful in Japan may not be successful in Iran. Iranians are creative people, if politic and economy permit.