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
ABBAS MADANDAR ARANI, LIDA KAKIA & ZAHRA BABAIE,
Comparative Perspectives on Educational Assessment System

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect: Because of Japan’s geographical condition, racial, cultural, and religious unity over the past centuries, there is a solid social structure among people.</th>
<th>Demography and educational consequences</th>
<th>Aspect: Three-forth 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.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Response: 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.</td>
<td>How have attributes of the population affected education?</td>
<td>Response: 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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequence: 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.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Consequence: 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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(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 could be found in the way Iranian have understood to learn from Japan's educational system.