

**Contextual Issues Impacting on Teacher Education:  
A Comparative Study between Japan and Egypt**

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## **Abstract:**

The main focus of this research paper is to explore some contextual issues that have left their impacts upon education, specifically teacher education in Japan and Egypt. Following a clarification of the key concepts, two main forces (religion and history) that shaped both societies were discussed. The differences and similarities between teacher education in Egypt and Japan were highlighted in light of contextual issues. Data for this study were collected through reviewing relevant documents in both Arabic and English in order to pinpoint how contextual issues affected certain elements in teacher education in both countries. Qualitative data specifically on Egypt were utilized to have an understanding of how pre-service and in-service teachers perceive some current status of the teaching profession. The paper concludes that the ways people perceived teaching in both countries are at odds due to various historical and socio-cultural reasons.

## **Introduction**

There is no doubt that the cultural context of a society (i.e. shared beliefs, habits, customs, values, attitudes, norms, etc.) has a considerable impact on its education system. In natural circumstances, an education system should not be in contradiction with its setting; rather, it should mirror social, economic, and political practices in society. As such, the education system's role is to maintain and advance the society's cultural fabric. In contrast, we can find instances where education is separated and alienated from the

socio-cultural fabric. Thus instead of preserving the unity of a nation, it becomes a huge impediment to its progress. Rich and renowned this model has been scrutinized by many Eastern and Western education scholars around the world. Their aim – in part - was to understand the Japanese education mystery and derive some lessons to ameliorate their educational systems. Unfortunately scholars in the Arab World and Africa did not have the same interest. Our study comes in response to this dearth in Egyptian writings about Japan. Our aim is to highlight the cultural underpinnings of the Japanese teacher education system and the ways in which the cultural context of the Japanese nation has been interwoven through the formal system of preparing teachers for their profession. We will then compare the Japanese model to its Egyptian counterpart and draw some lessons that might be beneficial to the advancement of the latter.

It should be noted that the Japanese model is not newborn and did not happen by accident. On the contrary, it has been generated through an interactive creation process where geopolitical, historical, cultural, and economic factors melted to produce such a civilization. This creation process would not have happened without education. In fact, education is considered a prominent factor in the recreation of Japanese civilization and comes second to the Japanese personality traits <sup>(1)</sup>.

## **Methodology**

Data for this study were analyzed using the National Character Approach – one of Comparative Education Research Approaches – that analyzes and interprets educational data in light of the factors and forces governing life in a society. The aim of using this

approach is to provide a thickly descriptive and analytical picture of the web of relationships between education and culture in both societies and to highlight the twin process of how the socio-cultural context and the education system in Japan and Egypt has been reflecting/enriching or even weakening one another. In both cases we focused on documents as our primary sources of data. In addition, in the case of Egypt we conducted a few interviews and focus group meetings with pre-service and in-service teachers to give an up to date account of some of the cultural issues affecting teaching at the present time. These data were audio-taped, transcribed, categorized, and utilized to support historical data.

### **Key Concept**

A key concept in this research paper is that of “culture”. Culture has been defined by many scholars. In this paper we see culture as “the overall complex context of a society that includes shared ideas, beliefs, habits, customs, attitudes, values, ways of thinking, work behavioral patterns, and every innovation thereof built on these roots or is developed in light of current life.”<sup>(2)</sup> In this sense, culture directs and approves/disapproves every behavior or situation in society. It is an answer to why people behave in certain ways and a verdict to whether those behaviors are normal and accepted or not. We will utilize this understanding of the concept of culture to identify the elements of the socio-cultural context of the Japanese and the Egyptian societies especially those habits, customs, ideas, and behaviors that pertain to teacher education in both countries.

## **The socio-cultural context of Japan: An historical overview**

Reischauer (1988) argues that it would be impossible to understand the Japanese modern civilization if we do not have a sufficient portrait of their past. The Japanese themselves are proud of their past and always look at themselves from a historical perspective. <sup>(3)</sup>

Two lessons are drawn from our historical review of Japan: (a) two cultures of Japan separated by the Meiji era (the enlightenment period) can be distinguished, and (b) the historical cultural transformation during the Meiji era did not mean total conversion but rather some very basic elements of the culture do exist and are preserved till today. In this section we will highlight some contextual issues that still characterize Japanese life and of course Japanese education.

### **Religion**

One very important component of the Japanese culture is religion. Shinto is the oldest religion in Japan. Shinto or the way to God is a set of old beliefs that do not have a heavenly basis or a holy book. It calls for belief in the *Kami* (superhuman power or God). In practice it calls for living spiritually and mentally in harmony with all creatures on earth.<sup>(4)</sup> This religious foundation influenced some very important modern Japanese social norms such as respect for the other(s) and self-denial for the sake of the group. <sup>(5)</sup> Shinto is not the only religion in Japan but Chinese Confucianism, Indian Buddhism, and many other religions do exist peacefully side by side. The Japanese are religious by nature but not fanatic. By Constitution freedom of worship is maintained for all citizens and the state does not support religious institutions nor does it fund religious education. Of importance to our cultural analysis is the ways in which religion is considered the

genesis for some shared values and behaviors that are accepted by all people as elements of the dominant culture of society. For example the Japanese greeting (bowing or lowering one's head to the other) has a religious origin. Hard work, respect for the family, obedience of the elders (e.g. parents and teachers) and commitment to group norms are other examples. The issue with religion in Japan is not with the religious rituals that are adopted and practiced by different religious sects but rather with how all religions produced collective agreed-upon values and behaviors.

One important cultural element that has a religious underpinning is love for group work (which will be explained later in terms of teacher education). Confucius ethics had identified a framework for group relationship that is built upon the idea of the unity of society. According to this belief, the rank or value of an individual is obtained from the group to which they belong whether a family, a professional group, a village/tribe, or even the nation. Society, in this sense, exists before the individual and every individual should represent the group and at the same time the group represents its members. <sup>(6)</sup>

### **History**

The Pre-Meiji eras (6th century through 1868) has also affected the cultural fabric of the Japanese society till today. During this long time span, society was strictly stratified and punishment (death in some cases) awaited everyone that deviated. This history is deeply entrenched into the Japanese mind and the result is obedience of the social system, adherence to moral commitment, and association with group behavior. De Mente (1992) mentioned that in some eras Japanese had to walk down streets in certain ways, move

their hand in different ways according to the situation, and eating and drinking habits were prescribed by a long-inherited social order before the Meiji.<sup>(7)</sup> Though historical, this strict delineation of social relations still affects Japanese behavioral and communication patterns in and outside educational institutions.

In 1868 Emperor Meiji ruled Japan. The Meiji rule extends over four decades from 1868 to 1912. During this enlightenment period, Japan has emerged from a period of feudalistic isolation that has lasted for more than 260 years. It was transformed into a full-fledged modern society. This transformation did not only occur in authority shape or the institutional system but more important the Japanese mentality has changed as well. The society replaced feudal traditionalism and dogmatism with elements of western modernity, however with Japanese flavor. Openness to other cultures – after incarceration – has been gigantic that it transformed many facets of social and economic life as well as the governing bodies, ideas, habits, and customs.<sup>(8)</sup> But this transformation did not wipe out the roots of the Japanese culture. Rather, it was a process of digesting imported elements of American and other Western cultures, melting them in the traditional culture bowl, and then reproducing new elements that are purely Japanese.<sup>(9)</sup> In short, it was a process of Jananization. Some of the cultural elements that revived during the Meiji era were the holiness of the Emperor, honesty and hard work, self-dependence, self-sacrifice for the nation, and loyalty to family and group.<sup>(10)</sup>

Hearn argues that by the end of Meiji era “the whole of Japanese education is still conducted upon a traditional plan almost the exact opposite of the Western plan” (p. 412,

cited in Ferguson, 1985).<sup>(11)</sup> Hearn was reflecting on the fact that despite its Western trappings, the Japanese educational system continued to function in ways that were more in keeping with the tenets of Confucianism and traditional Japanese culture than with those underlying Western pedagogical thought.

The most significant factor affecting the Japanese culture and henceforth the education system during the Taisho Era (1912-1945) was the rise of nationalism. In the post War era, the allies had a heavy mission in Japan— that is to reformulate the Japanese mentality and suppress their inherited zeal for military and heroic distinction. This was a more difficult mission than disarmament of Japan.<sup>(12)</sup> The U.S. and its western allies tried to cultivate new ideas such as individualism and competition and at the same time weaken others such as collective spirit, loyalty to group, patriarchy, and obsolete obedience to political figures. Those latter social aspects were seen - by the allies - as a threat to the resurrected society. At first the Japanese accepted the imported ideas as they were the bases for Western victory and modernity. But during the fifties and sixties of the 20th century they began to rebel against them. In many instances they reengineered ideas and behaviors to meet their inherited culture. During that time the notion that they should not be passive recipients of Western cultural elements culminated. Nationalism was at the peak and they wanted to give a practical example to the West and other nations of how they can modernize based on their inherited values and culture. In “The Japan that can say No”, Ishihara (1991) highlighted the superiority of Japan in different fields and attributed it to Japan’s adherence to its past. The following section highlights how the



teaching profession in Japan has been affected by the above-mentioned religious and historical cultural elements.<sup>(13)</sup>

### **Teachers and Teaching Profession on Japan's Cultural Map**

The profession of teaching is at the top in the ranks of professions in Japan. "Teachers in Japan enjoy high social, economic, and cultural status. That is why they perform their jobs with enthusiasm, perceiving that it is a mission they are carrying on for their nation."

<sup>(14)</sup> They even share the title of *sensei* used for doctors, ministers and other authority figures. <sup>(15)</sup> Teaching has had this high and perhaps sacred status due to an historical cultural background. "Teachers in Japan are highly respected because the missions they perform are similar to those accomplished by leaders of Confucianism and Buddhism."<sup>(16)</sup> There is no doubt that teachers in Japan perceive the importance of their roles as such. Moreover, they belong to a social and institutional system that urges them to excel in their work inside and outside school.

Due to this high rank, teaching is a very attractive and competitive profession. In fact, only 25% of applicants to teaching licensure eventually become teachers.<sup>(17)</sup> Licensure does not only include success in exams and interviews but the novice teacher has to have superior physical, mental, cognitive, as well as moral qualities. Discussing criteria for nomination for teaching, Collins (1989) stated that, "no matter how good a job applicant's academic results might be, unless the various school reports, references and interview tests reveal positive group-oriented behavior, the applicant would not be hired."<sup>(18)</sup> In addition, four exams set by different authorities in the Ministry of Education

should be passed by an applicant. One of these exams is conducted at the school where an applicant might be hired. Not only that but even during the phase of teacher preparation, “the Ministry of Education [in Japan] requires all colleges and universities wishing to offer courses leading to a teaching certificate to make a submission to the Ministry. Approval to offer such courses is made in terms of the type of teaching certificate”<sup>(19)</sup>.

Once a teaching licensure is awarded to “a desirable” character to work as a teacher in Japan, the teacher is guaranteed a life-long position.<sup>(20)</sup> However, teachers are not left without training; rather, a parallel lifelong training program is underway. First-year teachers receive substantial assistance and guidance from senior teachers. Teacher induction in Japan facilitates collegiality. All newly appointed full-time teachers also receive 20 to 30 days of intensive kenshū (training) and shidō (guidance) from master teachers at prefectural education centers and overnight retreats. Moreover, these programs give new teachers opportunities to form lifelong friendships and significant collegial bonds with peers. Prefectural education centers provide additional professional development at five, 10 and 20 years of service to further enhance ongoing in-service training. The notion of teacher as ‘lifelong learner’ is an integral part of Japanese educational philosophy (Japanese Ministry of Education, 2003).<sup>(21)</sup>

Professional development beyond the induction year can be divided into three broad categories: self-training, system-wide training, and university-based training (Padilla & Riley, 2003)<sup>(22)</sup>. Self-training includes teacher initiated study circles, action research and research lessons. A major component of self-training is school-based professional

development, which is a teacher driven, continuous process that nearly all schools in Japan are engaged in (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999).<sup>(23)</sup> Teachers work in grade-level groups, in subject-matter groups and in special committees. One of the most common features of school-based development is lesson study. While action research is characterized by individual teachers conducting research in their own classrooms with the goal of improving teaching, research lessons are a highly public activity. Research lessons are often videotaped and may involve many teachers planning, observing and learning together.

Japanese teachers spend less time teaching students in classrooms and considerably more time outside classrooms on other tasks. The average number of weekly classroom teaching hours is mandated at 16 hours for high school teachers, 21 hours for junior high school teachers, and 30 hours for elementary school teachers. However, most teachers spend long hours from dawn till nightfall at school. During summer vacation teachers are expected to continue coaching and other duties, including supervising students on excursions. The job description of a teacher includes coach, leader, mentor, counselor and friend.<sup>(24)</sup>

Schools also frequently have ‘open houses’ where teachers invite parents, other teachers as well as other members of the school community to visit their classrooms periodically. While all teachers are expected to participate in these activities they do not resent it or see it as a burden, but on the contrary they value these opportunities for connecting with

others. Teachers in Japan are far more open to sharing with colleagues and their spirit of camaraderie seems to be much greater than in Western countries. <sup>(25)</sup>

### **The socio-cultural context of Egypt: An historical overview**

Egypt lies in the far North East part of Africa and is connected to Asia by the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula and to Europe by the Mediterranean Sea. This unique location made Egypt a multicultural site throughout its history. For example, during the 1880s throughout the 1940s Egypt has been a destination to many European nationals who preferred to live in Egypt. Due to its strategic location and Suez Canal, Egypt has also been affected by many occupying forces which for sure have left their imprints on Egypt and its cultural fabric. Egyptians are by nature a peaceful people, friendly, generous, and hard working. One aspect of the Egyptian culture which is deeply-rooted in the minds of the people is their notion of education as “the most outstanding instrument for promoting the individual and society.” <sup>(26)</sup> In the following sections, we will highlight how religious and historical factors have affected education in general and specifically teacher education in modern Egypt.

### **Religion**

Islam is the dominant religion in Egypt. More than 90% of Egyptians are Muslims. In essence, Islam strongly supports seeking knowledge. Many verses in the holy Quran and many sayings (Hadith) of Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) encourage people to be educated. For example, the very first command in the Quran is “Iqraa” which means “read”. <sup>(27)</sup> Many others commands call for all Muslims to respect their tutors. Further,

many sayings of Prophet Mohammad urge all Muslims to seek knowledge wherever it may lie and whatever it may cost. This religious underpinning has been positively reflected on the status of teachers in the Egyptian context throughout history. However, this situation has changed during the last few decades. Since the freehand economic open-door policies of the 1970s, the religious-based respect and appreciation of teachers in Egypt - which was high during previous eras - has been degrading. In fact, during this period many values and social norms have been negatively affected by the new economic transformation. Cochran (1986) argues that from 1970 to 1981, “the educational system...reflected the mixed economy and divided culture... Foreign, private schools once again became the means of attaining higher economic and social status.”<sup>(28)</sup> At the background of that economic chaos the Egyptian society has witnessed a severe identity crisis that covered all aspects of life including education. As a result, teaching was degraded to bottom of the list of professional careers in society.

## **History**

The historical background of the Egyptian culture extends deeply in the history of ancient Egyptians who lived for thousands of years before Christ. In many instances throughout the Egyptian history, education was considered the main driving force of progress and modernity as was the case in Japan. At the outset of Egyptian modern history and specifically “in 1805 Mohammad Ali ruler of Egypt realized this fact and hence he started a modernization process based on education.”<sup>(29)</sup> There were no teachers of modern western-like education available in Egypt who could help him establish schools that could prepare his military personnel. He realized this handicap from the very

beginning so he began sending missions of students to Europe as early as 1809 and establishing military schools in 1816. <sup>(30)</sup> Fascinated by the French, he created a highly centralized and rigorous system of education. But in 1841, the educational system collapsed in the wake of the 1840 defeat by the European powers. The reduction of the army caused a corresponding reduction in the number of schools, and thus a decline of modern education in Egypt began. <sup>(31)</sup> When Isma'il came to power in 1879, he began another cycle to modernize education following the footsteps of his grandfather. But his ambitions to make Egypt "part of Europe" ended so rapidly due to the British Occupation.

The British influence on Egyptian education is beyond the scope of this paper. But two aspects introduced by the British that definitely had negative (and long-lasting) impacts on the educational system and on the society in general are worthy of mention. The first is that they maintained the highly-centralized education system so as to be able to control it. <sup>(32)</sup> Another is that they transferred a very rigid examination system to Egypt. <sup>(33)</sup> After 70 years of occupation, the British left Egypt but their imprints on education – especially centralization and the exam system - are still established in Egyptian education. Boktor's outline (1936) of the status of teachers toward the end of British occupation does still relatively apply on the current situation. He reported that:

The teacher has nothing to do with the school organization, administration, or curriculum ... His position has always been, and still is, that of a soldier in the army. His duty is to do what he is told to do. He is responsible to his immediate chief, the headmaster. Similarly the latter is responsible to the controller, and so on, to the top of the line. Each has to obey the orders that come from above. Discipline, textbooks, timetable, daily routine, and everything done at school is outside the sphere of the teacher. He merely

teaches and is not expected or allowed even to suggest ways and means. Certainly the huge centralized system is chiefly to blame for this; but the system is not all. The training of the teacher in Egypt does not develop any professional pride in him...pedagogical knowledge is incidental and old-fashioned. Development of personality is not part of the program. <sup>(34)</sup>

Following the 1952 revolution, Egypt began a new wave of education reform—namely expansion of free education from primary to university. Needless to say that this reform required huge numbers of teachers and thus teaching became a highly desirable profession. In fact, during the 1950s-1970s thousands of teachers were dispatched to many Arab and African countries to help expand and reform their education systems. <sup>(35)</sup> As mentioned previously with the open door policy, teachers and the teaching profession have been degraded. In recent decades, the unprecedented population explosion, increased social demand on education, lack of resources, and lack of cause have left Egypt lost in its pursuit to reform education and teaching.

### **Teachers and Teaching Profession on Egypt's Cultural Map**

Hargreaves (1980) discusses two aspects of professional status which have been of concern to teachers: a) high public prestige or “respect” and b) high levels of pay or “remuneration.” <sup>(36)</sup> Unfortunately for a long time teachers in Egypt have been suffering from low payments compared to their counterparts in other professions. It is not surprising to hear complaints about the low salaries whenever you talk with an Egyptian teacher. The focus group discussions revealed that low payments and shrinking respect for teachers are amongst the negative cultural issues facing teachers. Here are some interview extracts:

Female A: the perspective people take about teachers is so demeaning. They look at teaching as a lousy career. Sometimes they disrespect teachers. If you go to a place and say you are a doctor they respect you but they will not treat you the same if you say you are a teacher...

Male A: TV serials, movies and even newspaper cartoons make fun of teachers and this is perhaps a reason for the disrespect for teachers.

Female B: yes, they usually depict the teacher as an idiot who wears funny things and talks in a funny way. This increased the disrespect of the teacher in our society.

Very recently the Egyptian Parliament endorsed a new bill to improve teachers' remuneration. According to the "new cadre," teachers who teach academic subjects will have a 50% rise of their basic salaries during the 2007/2008 fiscal year. It is expected that, after passing certain rigorous training programs, successful teachers will be awarded another rise of 150% of their basic salary. The newly appointed teachers will be paid LE 500 (\$ 88) a month which to be increased throughout the term of employment to LE 2,000. <sup>(37)</sup> The government hopes that with economic improvement of teachers' salaries, their social status will be improved as well.

Another pressing cultural issue that is connected to teacher professionalism is that fact that teaching in public schools in Egypt is not a desirable job but many people go into it only to secure a living. Others proceed for a teaching career because they failed to go into other more prestigious professions. Our informants stated that:

Female C: if you ask students who joined the faculty of education about the reasons why they selected this faculty, 75% of the will say we came here because of our grades in the General Secondary School Certificate.

Female D: when I finished secondary school, Maktab Al-tanseeq (National College Admission Bureau) assigned me to the faculty of education. I did not want to become a teacher so I sat again for the secondary school certificate exam the next year. My aim was



to go to the faculty of information technology. But again I was assigned to the faculty of education for the second time because of my grades. I was very frustrated.

Male B: They don't even allow you to specialize in the subject you desire. If you want to become an English teacher, you have to get a certain mark in English in your Secondary School Exam.

As far as professional development is concerned, it is hard to find sustainable or genuine teacher training programs. <sup>(38)</sup> Teachers get formal training when it is time for promotion. Induction of new teachers is still under study and USAID has recently partnered with the Ministry of Education to initiate and pilot induction programs for novice teachers.

### **Comparative analysis and conclusion:**

Teaching is a highly respected profession in Japan but in Egypt it does not have the same sacred position due to economic reasons in recent decades. Students in both countries are prepared in university colleges but the two countries differ in their admission procedures. While the general secondary school certificate score is the sole defining criterion for admission of students to faculties of education in Egypt, Japan requires extra admission exams. Graduates from faculties of education in Egypt do not have to make an extra effort in order to become teachers. They are appointed based on their university certificates. In Japan, the teaching profession is very competitive. A graduate of a teacher education program has to pass many exams and interviews and has to prove that he is worthy of being a teacher. Teacher education programs in Egypt do not focus on training their graduates on school curricula that they will be teaching. But in Japan, the Ministry of education approves the preparation program and students are trained to teach subjects they are expected to teach. Graduates from faculties of education in Egypt are not

required to have a teaching license. But obtaining a teaching license in Japan is a must. Training is important in Japan. Novice teachers are inducted for one full year under the guidance of an expert teacher. Teachers, for cultural reasons, continue a life-long training process and are willing to pay for their training. Training in Japan often occurs inside the school and can also occur in the university or territorial training centers. In Egypt, training is usually formal and is managed centrally and located in the Ministry's headquarters in different governorates. University is seldom used as a site for training.

From our review of the Japanese education system, one cultural theme often exists. The Japanese continues to modify Western pedagogical concepts to meet the needs of their own society. They have indeed sought for knowledge throughout the world, but from the era of the Emperor Meiji to the present, they have taken that knowledge and placed their own cultural stamp upon it, thereby defining Japanese educational practices. Historically speaking Egypt started its educational project 50 years before Japan but nowadays the Japanese have done a far better job than Egyptians. Reasons for this lag are many and controversial. For sure the Egyptian education project has faced bumps down the road (the many wars, internal and external conflicts, and economic troubles), but we believe that the cultural issues are at the core of the regression happening to teaching in Egypt.

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