



COMPARISON OF THE INDONESIAN AND JAPANESE EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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Abstrak:

This study aims to analyze the comparison between the education systems of Indonesia and Japan, focusing on aspects such as curriculum structure, teacher quality, teaching methods, evaluation systems, technology integration, school culture, and government policies. The research uses a qualitative approach with a comparative study method through literature analysis from various sources such as scientific journals, government policy documents, and international organization reports for the period 2020-2024. The theories used include George Bereday's Theory of Comparative Education, Bronfenbrenner's Theory of Educational Ecology, and Michael Lipsky's Theory of Policy Implementation as the analytical framework. The results of the study show fundamental differences between the two education systems, where Japan has a more structured, consistent, and coherent system with highly selective teacher recruitment, proven effective Lesson Study and Problem-Solving-based learning methods, and a strong school culture that instills values of discipline and responsibility. Meanwhile, Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum offers greater flexibility and autonomy, but faces challenges such as disparities in quality between regions, gaps in teacher competence, and inconsistencies in policy implementation. Japanese students consistently outperform Indonesian students in international tests such as PISA, reflecting the effectiveness of their education system. However, the Japanese system also has weaknesses in the form of extremely high academic pressure due to intense entrance exam competition. This study recommends that Indonesia can learn from Japan's best practices by improving teacher recruitment selectivity, developing a culture of professional collaboration, strengthening integrated character education, and equalizing the quality of education, while still considering Indonesia's unique social, cultural, and geographical context. Smart and gradual adaptation is more important than the direct application of the Japanese system, which may not be suitable for local conditions in Indonesia. Educational transformation requires a long-term commitment from all stakeholders and should not be influenced solely by political dynamics.

Keywords: comparative, Indonesian, Japanese, education

INTRODUCTION

Education is the main foundation in building the quality of a nation's human resources. In the current era of globalization, every country is competing to improve the quality of its education in order to produce a competitive generation that is ready to face future challenges. Indonesia, as a developing country, continues to strive to improve its education system, even though various international evaluations show that Indonesia's educational achievements still lag behind those of developed countries in Asia (Finlandia, 2025). The results of the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment



(PISA) ranked Indonesia 67th out of 81 countries, with an average score that is still below the standard of OECD countries. This condition shows that there is still a significant gap between the quality of education in Indonesia and developed countries, especially in East Asia (Mislaini & Amelia, 2024).

Japan is one of the countries that consistently ranks at the top in various global education quality assessments. The Japanese education system is known for its holistic approach, emphasizing not only academic achievement but also the formation of students' character and moral values. Japan's success in creating a quality education system is inseparable from the commitment of the government, the active role of the community, and a strong learning culture among students. According to Tanaka and Yamamoto (2024), the Japanese education system places teachers as a highly respected profession with high competency standards and implements a flexible yet well-structured curriculum (Halawa, Telaumbanua, & Buulolo, 2023). Learning in Japan also emphasizes problem solving, creativity, and collaboration among students, enabling them to think critically from an early age.

Meanwhile, Indonesia faces various complex challenges in its education system. The disparity in education quality between urban and rural areas remains a serious unresolved issue. Uneven educational infrastructure, varying teacher quality, and frequent curriculum changes are obstacles to creating consistent education standards throughout the archipelago. Research by Wijaya and Kusuma (2023) reveals that even though the government has allocated 20% of the state budget to education, the effectiveness of its use is still questionable because not all regions have experienced significant improvements. The disparity in learning facilities between schools in Jakarta and schools in remote areas of Papua, for example, reflects the unequal access to quality education for all Indonesian children (B, Firmansyah, Heri, Christiana, & Asmara, 2025).

The differences in educational philosophy between Indonesia and Japan are also interesting to explore further. The Indonesian education system, which is influenced by various cultures and religious values, tends to be more diverse in its approach, while Japan has a more uniform educational philosophy with an emphasis on discipline, hard work, and social harmony. In the context of learning, Japan implements the "Lesson Study" method, which involves collaboration between teachers to continuously improve the quality of teaching through observation and joint reflection (Septiani, Nabila, Preity, Br, & Jakarta, 2023). On the other hand, Indonesia has only recently begun to adopt a similar approach through the Guru Penggerak (Teacher Activator) program, but its implementation is still limited and uneven across regions. These differences in approach have implications for student learning outcomes and their readiness to enter the workforce (Widuri, Murba, Subekti, & Gulo, 2025).

A current phenomenon is the digital transformation in education after the COVID-19 pandemic. Both countries face the same challenge of integrating technology into the learning process, but with different responses. Japan, with its advanced technological infrastructure, was able to adapt quickly and even develop innovative digital learning platforms. Meanwhile, Indonesia is still

struggling with the digital divide, where not all students have adequate internet access or devices for online learning. According to Hidayat and Nugroho (2024), only 60% of students in Indonesia have stable internet access for learning purposes, especially in remote areas. This situation further widens the gap in the quality of education between privileged and underprivileged students (Hanggoro, 2022).

Although there have been many studies comparing education systems in various countries, there are still research gaps that need to be addressed. Most previous studies tend to focus on macro comparisons such as curriculum structure or evaluation systems, without delving deeply into the cultural and social aspects that influence the implementation of education policies. In addition, there is a lack of studies that comprehensively analyze how differences in work culture, community values, and reward systems for teachers in both countries impact the quality of educational output. Research by Ahmad and Setiawan (2023) shows that contextual factors such as school organizational culture and parental participation greatly influence the successful implementation of education policies, but these aspects are rarely the main focus in comparative studies of education between Indonesia and Japan (Montanesa et al., 2021).

The importance of conducting an in-depth comparative study between the Indonesian and Japanese education systems lies in the potential for learning that can be adopted. Japan, with all its advantages, can be a benchmark for Indonesia to improve its education system, but of course, taking into account the different social, cultural, and economic contexts. Not all good practices from Japan can be applied in Indonesia without adaptation to local conditions. Therefore, this study will explore not only the structural differences between the two education systems, but also the contextual factors that make a policy successful or unsuccessful in its implementation. With a comprehensive understanding, it is hoped that applicable and sustainable policy recommendations can be formulated to improve the quality of education in Indonesia (Penelitian & Pendidikan, 2025).

Based on the above description, this study seeks to fill the knowledge gap by conducting a holistic comparative analysis of the Indonesian and Japanese education systems. The focus of the study is not only on technical and administrative aspects, but also on cultural and social dimensions and practical implementation at the school level. By identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each system and understanding the factors that influence their success, this study is expected to contribute both theoretically and practically to the development of Indonesia's future education policies. This study is relevant given that Indonesia is currently undergoing an education transformation through the Merdeka Belajar (Freedom of Learning) program, so that lessons learned from the experiences of other successful countries such as Japan can serve as valuable references in designing effective and sustainable improvement strategies (Pendekatan & Solusi, 2025).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a comparative study method to analyze the differences and similarities between the education systems of Indonesia and Japan. The choice of a qualitative approach is based on the research objective of gaining an in-depth understanding of the complex aspects of both education systems, including cultural and social dimensions and policy implementation, which cannot be measured solely by statistical figures. The comparative method was chosen because it allows researchers to make systematic comparisons of various elements of education in both countries, thereby identifying the factors that make an education system successful or face obstacles.

The type of research used is descriptive-comparative research, in which researchers not only describe the characteristics of each education system separately, but also compare key elements to find patterns, significant differences, and potential lessons that can be applied. This research is library research or a literature study, which means that data is collected from various existing literature sources such as scientific journals, books, government reports, and education policy documents from both countries.

This study adopts Bronfenbrenner's Educational Ecology Theory, which views education as a system influenced by various layers of the environment, ranging from the microsystem (classroom and school), mesosystem (relationships between educational components), exosystem (government policy), to the macrosystem (culture and community values). This framework helps researchers understand how various factors interact to shape the quality of education in Indonesia and Japan.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Comparison of Educational Structure and Curriculum

A comparison of the Indonesian and Japanese curriculum structures reveals several fundamental similarities, particularly in terms of the 6-3-3 education system (six years of elementary school, three years of junior high school, and three years of senior high school). Both countries also emphasize the importance of character education in addition to academic mastery, with Indonesia promoting the Pancasila Student Profile and Japan offering a special Dotoku subject for moral education. Both countries have also reformed their curricula to integrate 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration into learning. These similarities indicate a global awareness of the importance of preparing students not only with academic knowledge but also with the skills and character needed in the future (Infrastructure, 2024) .

However, the fundamental difference lies in the approach and implementation of the curriculum. The Japanese curriculum tends to be more structured and consistent across the country due to strict control by MEXT, while Indonesia gives greater autonomy to regions and schools, which creates significant variations in quality. Japan has a more mature

curriculum development system with a regular and planned revision cycle every 10 years, while Indonesia tends to experience more frequent and sometimes reactive curriculum changes in response to political conditions. Another difference is in terms of depth versus breadth of material, where the Japanese curriculum emphasizes in-depth mastery of fundamental concepts, while the Indonesian curriculum tends to be broader but with varying degrees of depth. In terms of advantages, Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum offers flexibility that allows schools to be more responsive to local needs and student characteristics. This approach is in line with the principle of differentiated learning that recognizes the diversity of students' abilities and interests. However, its weakness is uneven implementation due to differences in the capacity of teachers and schools to develop operational curricula. On the other hand, the Japanese curriculum has the advantage of consistency and quality standards that are maintained throughout the country, but its weakness is a lack of flexibility that can hinder school innovation and creativity (Nakamura, 2024). The high academic pressure in the Japanese system is also often criticized for causing excessive stress on students. The relevance of the curriculum to 21st-century needs is an important consideration in this analysis. Both countries have attempted to integrate 21st-century skills into their curricula, but with varying degrees of success. Japan, with its better infrastructure and systematic support, has been able to implement technology-based learning, problem-solving, and collaborative learning more effectively. Indonesia still faces obstacles in implementation due to limited facilities, disparities in teacher competence, and regional disparities (Hidayat, 2023). The implications of curriculum differences on student learning outcomes are clearly seen in international tests such as PISA, where Japanese students consistently demonstrate a deeper understanding of academic concepts, while Indonesian students still struggle with questions that require higher-order thinking skills (Ekasuci, Salsabila, & Pratama, 2025).

2. Learning methods in Indonesia

The learning models commonly applied in Indonesia vary greatly depending on the level of education, school characteristics, and teacher competencies. In the era of the Merdeka Curriculum, the government encourages the application of various innovative learning models such as Problem Based Learning (PBL), Project Based Learning (PjBL), Discovery Learning, and Inquiry-Based Learning. These models are designed to activate students in the learning process and develop higher-order thinking skills. However, in practice, lecture-style or teacher-centered learning still dominates in many classrooms, especially in areas with limited facilities and teacher competencies. The gap between the ideal curriculum and the reality of its implementation in the classroom is a major challenge in the transformation of learning in Indonesia (Halawa et al., 2023).

The student-centered learning approach, which is the focus of the Merdeka Curriculum, emphasizes the active role of students in constructing

their own knowledge. Teachers are expected to act as facilitators who guide students in the process of exploration and discovery, rather than simply transferring knowledge. This concept is in line with constructivist theory, which believes that meaningful learning occurs when students are actively involved in building their understanding. In its implementation, schools in Indonesia have begun to apply differentiated learning that accommodates the diversity of learning styles, learning speeds, and student interests. However, the challenge is that many teachers still find it difficult to design and implement truly student-centered learning because they are accustomed to traditional approaches (Lengkong et al., 2025).

The role of technology in learning has increased, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the massive digitization of education. Platforms such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, and various local Learning Management Systems (LMS) have begun to be widely used. The government has also launched the Merdeka Mengajar Platform, which provides various digital learning resources, teacher training, and assessment tools. However, the digital divide remains a major obstacle, as not all students have access to adequate devices and internet connections (Hidayat & Nugroho, 2024). Project-based and problem-based learning began to be implemented in various subjects, where students were given real projects to be completed collaboratively, but its implementation was still limited to certain schools with adequate facilities and competent teachers. Challenges in implementing innovative learning methods included teacher resistance to change, time constraints in a dense curriculum, a lack of practical training for teachers, and a lack of adequate infrastructure and learning resources (B et al., 2025).

3. Learning methods in Japan

The Lesson Study approach is a distinctive feature and strength of the Japanese learning system that has been practiced for decades. Lesson Study is a collaborative process in which a group of teachers jointly plan, observe, and reflect on a lesson with the aim of improving the quality of teaching practices. In a Lesson Study cycle, teachers collaborate to design a detailed lesson plan, one teacher implements the lesson while the others observe the students' responses and understanding, and then all teachers gather to discuss what worked and what needs improvement (Tanaka, 2023). This practice creates a culture of continuous professional learning among teachers and has proven effective in systematically improving the quality of learning. Interestingly, the focus of observation is not on teacher performance, but on the learning process of students, which makes teachers more focused on how students understand the material.

The Problem-Solving method, known as Mondai-Kaiketsu, is a very popular learning approach in Japan, especially in mathematics and science subjects. In this approach, students are not directly taught formulas or problem-solving procedures, but are given challenging problems and encouraged to find various solution strategies through exploration and

discussion. Teachers act as facilitators who guide students through provocative questions without giving direct answers. This approach develops students' critical thinking, creativity, and perseverance in facing challenges. Group discussion-based learning is an important element in this method, where students learn from their peers' perspectives and develop their mathematical or scientific communication skills (Andriyana & Masyitoh, 2018).

The integration of moral education, or *Dotoku*, is a unique aspect of the Japanese education system that sets it apart from many other countries. *Dotoku* is not merely an academic subject, but a holistic approach to shaping students' character through moral stories, discussions of life values, and self-reflection. In *Dotoku* learning, students are presented with moral dilemmas and encouraged to think about values such as honesty, responsibility, empathy, respect for life, and contribution to society. This learning does not evaluate right or wrong answers, but encourages students to reflect on their own values (Sato, 2023). Extracurricular activities or *Bukatsu* are also an integral part of learning in Japan, where almost all students are required to join at least one club activity such as sports, arts, or cultural activities. *Bukatsu* not only develops specific skills but also teaches important values such as dedication, teamwork, respect for seniors (*senpai-kohai* relationship), and perseverance that will be useful in their future lives.

4. Comparison of learning methods

The difference in philosophy in the learning approach between Indonesia and Japan is quite significant even though both are oriented towards student-centered learning. Indonesia, with its *Merdeka Curriculum*, emphasizes freedom and flexibility, giving great autonomy to teachers and students in determining the learning path. This approach is in line with the context of Indonesia's diversity, which requires local adaptation. In contrast, Japan, although also implementing student-centered learning, has a more organized and systematic structure through proven methods such as Lesson Study and the Problem-Solving approach. The Japanese philosophy emphasizes on mastery learning, where students do not move on to new concepts until they have fully mastered the previous ones, while Indonesia tends to cover broader material with varying degrees of depth.

The effectiveness of each method on learning outcomes can be seen from various indicators. The Problem-Solving method, which is consistently applied in Japan, has been proven to produce students with superior mathematical reasoning and scientific thinking skills, as reflected in the PISA and TIMSS results. Japanese students are not only able to memorize formulas but also truly understand the concepts and can apply them in various contexts. In Indonesia, although innovative learning methods such as PBL and PjBL have been introduced, inconsistent and varied implementation has resulted in less than optimal impact on students'

higher-order thinking skills (Hidayat, 2023). Lesson Study, which has begun to be adopted in Indonesia through the Guru Penggerak (Teacher Activator) program, shows promising results in schools that implement it seriously, but its reach is still limited.

The role of culture in shaping learning methods is clearly evident in this comparison. Japanese culture, which emphasizes group harmony, collectivism, and continuous improvement (kaizen), strongly supports the implementation of Lesson Study and collaborative learning. Japanese students are accustomed to working in groups, listening to others' opinions, and prioritizing group success over individual achievement. In contrast, Indonesia's more individualistic culture in the context of learning and the lack of a tradition of professional collaboration among teachers are obstacles to the implementation of similar methods. However, Indonesia has strength in its cultural diversity, which, if utilized properly, can enrich learning methods with unique local perspectives.

The advantages and disadvantages of each approach need to be understood contextually. The Japanese approach excels in terms of consistency, clear structure, and measurable results, but its weaknesses are a lack of flexibility and high academic pressure that can cause stress for students. The phenomenon of "examination hell" in Japan, where students experience tremendous pressure to succeed in school entrance exams, is a major criticism of this system. On the other hand, the Indonesian approach offers greater flexibility and room for creativity, but its weakness is inconsistency in quality and difficulty in measuring effectiveness due to too much variation (Sari, 2024). Adapting the Japanese method to the Indonesian context must consider several important factors such as infrastructure readiness, teacher competence, school culture, and student characteristics. Most importantly, Indonesia cannot simply copy and paste the Japanese method, but needs to adapt its basic principles to the local context, such as implementing Lesson Study in a way that is in line with Indonesia's collaborative culture, developing a problem-solving approach that is relevant to the context of Indonesian students' lives, and integrating character education with existing Pancasila values.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals fundamental differences between the Indonesian and Japanese education systems, not only in terms of structure but also in terms of philosophy and commitment to education. Japan has proven that successful education requires a coherent system, from selective teacher recruitment, continuous training, effective learning methods such as Lesson Study, to a strong school culture. Indonesia, with all its diversity, faces greater challenges, but it can learn from Japan's experience through intelligent adaptation to the local context. The Merdeka Curriculum points in the right direction, but its success depends on teacher readiness, infrastructure support, and consistency of implementation, which still varies between regions.

Improving Indonesia's education system requires a holistic and sustainable approach that is not affected by political changes. Strategic steps that can be taken include increasing teacher selectivity and professionalism, developing a culture of collaboration through Lesson Study, strengthening integrated character education, and equalizing the quality of education across all regions. Educational transformation is a long-term process that requires the commitment of all parties. This research is expected to contribute ideas for policymakers to continue innovating and making gradual but fundamental changes, because the best investment a nation can make is in the education of its young generation, who will determine Indonesia's future amid global competition.

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