

## Positive Influences: Comparison of Educational Systems of Japan and El Salvador

Estela Eugenia Menjivar MANCIA \*

(2016年3月3日受理)

### 1. Introduction

Education in Developing countries are in constant strive to improvement. These countries lack resources to develop its full potential; however it does not mean there is no improvement or solution possible. Usually, these countries receive aid from developed countries. This is the case of El Salvador. El Salvador is a small Central American country in a constant fight to improve. El Salvador and Japan have had a relationship since 1935 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2016). One important contribution Japan has made to El Salvador is providing the sector of education with support in different areas, one of these being scholarship for Salvadorian citizens to come to Japan and prepare themselves in order to return home and become a positive influence for everyone else.

In honor to this contribution, this project will attempt to provide comparison between the Educational Systems of Japan and El Salvador, not to prove one better than the other one, but to find possible ways in which El Salvador's Educational System can be positively influenced in order to start a process of improvement.

### 2. Overview

#### *2.1. Background of El Salvador and its Educational System*

El Salvador's Educational System is run by the

Ministry of Education, called MINED. The system is in constant change. Most of the education in the country is public; however, in the capital city, San Salvador, there is a high percentage of private schools. These schools count with an enriched curriculum (or two in the case of bilingual schools) and a higher level of education achievement. Unfortunately it is only reached by the children whose families have the means to pay for it.

In terms of public education, El Salvador has historically demonstrated to be one of the Latin American countries with lowest investment by its own government (PNUD 2013). Also, the investment per person is also low compared to Latin America (ERCA 2014). For example, while in other countries, people invest an average amount of \$422 to \$700 in education per year, people in El Salvador invest an average of only \$100 in education (ERCA 2014).

It is important to mention, however, El Salvador is one of the developing countries who has been seriously affected by a twelve-year civil war, which directly affected the Education Section in the decade of the 80s (PNUD 2013). It has been hard for the country to recover its stability. There is a great need for positive proposals and changes in its system; there is a big room for development and improvement. This is the reason why it is important to find characteristics in other educational systems which can serve as a positive influence to El Salvador.

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\* Monbukakusho Scholar,  
under Prof. OOKAWARA's guidance. Faculty of Education, Iwate University

## 2.2. Purpose of this project

The main objective of this study is, as mentioned before, not to demeanor one system under another, but rather to utilize one as an influence to the other. There are two objectives attempted to be accomplished: first, to recognize elements which bring positive results to Japanese Educational System and categorize them into feasible or unfeasible changes to be adopted in a Salvadorian System; and second, to study the Evaluation System followed by teachers in Japan, compare it to El Salvador's, and identify possible changes to be proposed.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Data Collection

In the project, several official sources were researched in order to obtain the most important characteristics of both educational systems. This information was later narrowed down to the most important areas to compare between both. There were three areas of focused when collecting data: the main characteristics of a Japanese Educational System compared to El Salvador's, the evaluation system in both public educational systems, and the most important traits of elementary school levels in both countries.

#### 3.1.1. Characteristics of Japanese Educational System vs. El Salvador's

There are many differences in which one country's way of managing its educational system varies from another; however, there are certain characteristics that may help not so developed systems to understand which direction may be taken in case of making changes for improvement. It is important to keep in mind the two systems being compared in this section are the ones of a developed country versus the one of a developing country.

According to Prof. Shogo Ichikawa (1990) of the National Institute for the Educational Policy Research (NIER), there are eight distinctive features the

complex Japanese Educational System has. In the case of this study, only three of these characteristics will be compared to the Educational System of El Salvador: the way that school education dominates children's life, the automatic promotion between grades based on age, and the function of entrance examinations.

#### 3.1.1.1 The way school education dominates children's life

Schools in Japan occupy a very important role in children's lives. There are several features their school system have that make it unique. The school year, for example, occupies 240 days; it starts in the month of April and finishes the next year until March. During this school year there are teaching hours, of course; usually the same as most other industrialized countries, but there are several other activities that occupy students' calendars. They participate in club activities and attend special cram schools, as well. This means, most of their day is occupied by their academic life, they usually spend the morning and afternoon inside the school. Also, since schools are expected to play an extensive role in children's lives including discipline and moral standards, they supervise the life of students out of school (Ichikawa 1990). Teachers in Japan usually program visits to students' homes to supervise their life outside of school. Parents work hand in hand with schools to provide children with the best opportunities to develop the best quality of education in each one (Sato 2004).

These characteristics are very different from the ones of the system in El Salvador. Different from Japan, the school year in El Salvador has only 200 days; it starts in the month of February and finishes in the month of November (Ley General de Educación 2000). Students can optionally participate in club activities provided by the school; however not all students participate in these activities. A school day in El Salvador usually consists of five teaching hours, normally in the morning; after their classes are over, they are free to go home. Free

time of students is responsibility of parents and not the schools'. There are no home visits from the schools to Salvadorian homes.

### *3.1.1.2 The automatic promotion between grades based on age*

Students in Japan are promoted automatically and move to the next grade based on age. Classmates in elementary and lower secondary levels move on to the next grade despite their educational achievements. Students who are gifted are not allowed to skip a grade or move ahead, nor do they force the slow learners to repeat a grade (Ichikawa 1990). All students have the same opportunities. Compulsory education which goes from elementary school first year to lower secondary school third year (ninth grade to El Salvador) follow this system.

In El Salvador, things are slightly different. Even though compulsory education is the same (from first year in elementary to the third year of lower secondary school), the Ministry of Education establishes that after the fourth grade of elementary level, students who do not meet the minimum requirements for the following year should repeat the grade. Also, students who prove a higher academic achievement should be given more opportunities to develop their potential (Ley General de Educación 2000). In this case, education favors those with highest academic achievements.

### *3.1.1.3 Entrance Examinations*

Whenever a Japanese student is ready to make a transition from one academic level to another, he or she must take an entrance examination. Entrance examinations perform the role of sorting applicants out; in these examinations, students' academic achievements count. Even though, these kinds of examinations create psychological stress to both students and their parents, upper secondary schools have enough capacity for all applicants. These examinations take place in upper secondary level

and university level. Different from other countries, in Japan there is no general certificate of secondary education; instead students take a selective school-specific entrance examination (Ichikawa 1991).

On the other hand, in El Salvador there are no entrance examinations between academic levels; especially since students must meet a minimum grade of 6 (in a scale from 1 to 10: 10 being the highest) in all subjects in order to be promoted, after fourth grade in elementary level. When students in El Salvador graduate from Secondary high school, they must take a national exam called PAES and obtain a minimum grade of 6 in all subjects in order to obtain their High School Diploma with the title of "Bachiller" or Baccalaureate. PAES examination is 20% of their last high school year's final grade and it is usually used for University applications.

### *3.1.2. Important traits of elementary school in Japan vs. El Salvador.*

Elementary schools both in Japan and El Salvador comprise of six grades and are part of compulsory education in both systems. The Ministry of Education of both Japan and El Salvador (MEXT and MINED) are the entities who establish the subjects to be taught, the content, the number of school hours, among other criteria. There are several differences between them.

In Japan, elementary level students have a class day of seven hours approximately. Students have lunch in school and they take turns to serve the meal to their classmates. Everyone is served the same menu, except for those with food allergies. Regarding subjects, elementary school teachers teach all subjects and they usually stay with their students for a period of two years. This allows teachers to get well acquainted with their students in order to help them achieve their highest potential. Students' materials and supplies are provided to all students, usually free of charge. Every student has the same books and materials in order to give each one the same opportunities. There are many

school ceremonies and activities that are planned in such a way that parents can be involved as well. Sports Days, for example, are usually community events that allow students and their families to spend time together. (MEXT 2010, Sato 2004)

In El Salvador, on the other hand, the school day in a public institution consists of 5 hours only. Students have meals at home. There are some public schools that provide students with a morning snack; however, it is not a constant habit due to the lack of funds. In terms of subject teachings, elementary school level teachers in El Salvador usually teach all academic subjects except for the subjects of Physical Education and Art. These subjects are taught by special teachers. Public schools provide students with texts and materials; unfortunately there are several cases in which these are not delivered before the school year begins, resulting in delay in the development of content in a school year (MINED 2015, Ascencio Velasquez 2015).

There is another reality in El Salvador: the private institutions. These institutions have a higher level of education. Their curriculums vary from the ones MINED establishes. There are institutions with two different curriculum carried out throughout the year: a national and an international one. These are known as bilingual schools. Students spend a period of 8 hours a day approximately; and even though they have lunch in school, each student must bring or buy their own. In private institutions, students' parents pay for books and materials and academic achievement plays an important role in students' development.

The country's economic status plays an important role in the possibilities of each system. While one country is capable of supporting a mostly public educational system successfully, with same opportunities for all students, the other one struggles to maintain the minimum conditions for their public institutions. Students in Japan do not have the need to attend a private institution to get a better education,

since its public education provides students with same opportunities. On the other hand, Salvadorian parents who have the means to pay a private educational system prefer to do so to provide their children with a better education.

### *3.1.3. Evaluation System of elementary school level vs. El Salvador's*

Evaluating and assessing students and educational systems became a focus point due to the main differences between them. This became evident after having the opportunity of visiting several schools and talking to several teachers of different levels. In Japan, for example, every school has its own Evaluation Report; the evaluation system is based on the same aspects. Students are evaluated in different areas or subjects: Japanese, Mathematics, Life (for first and second year of Elementary School), Music, Drawing and Manual Arts, Physical Education, and Daily Life. Each subject has different aspects students should be able to do, and these are the aspects evaluated under a letter-system: A, B, or C; A being the highest grade possible and C the lowest. Obtaining an A in any of the areas would mean the student is able to do the aspect described really well. If a student obtains a B, this would mean the aspect described can be done in a satisfactory way; and by consequence, obtaining a C would mean the student needs to dedicate more effort to the evaluated aspect. The results, however, do not affect the students' promotion to the next grade level. They all move on regardless of the grade obtained in each aspect or area.

The school year is divided by terms; however this division may vary from institution to institution. Usually a report card may contain three evaluations per aspect meaning there are three evaluation terms, while others may contain only two. See Appendix 7.1 for an example.

The Salvadorian Evaluation System is quite different. Every Educational Institution may have its own report

card or evaluation system; however, at the end of every grade level the Ministry of Education demands every single student in the National Educational System (private or public sector) must have a Certificate filled out. This certificate divides the students' grades in two Main Areas: Academic Subjects and Moral and Civic Education.

The Academic Area in this certificate is divided into seven subjects: Spanish, Mathematics, Science Health & Environment, Social Studies Art Education, and Physical Education. All of these subjects should be evaluated in a numerical scale from 1- 10; 10 being the highest grade and 1 being the lowest. For a student to be promoted, each of these grades should be higher than a 6. If a student is in fourth year of elementary school or higher and does not obtain the minimum grade established, then he or she will not be promoted to the next grade level and should repeat it. The other main area of the certificate is Moral and Civic Education. In this area, 5 different aspects are evaluated under a letter system: E, MB, or B; these are concepts in Spanish, which could be translated to Excellent, Very Good, and Good respectively (MINED 2015). See Appendix 7.2 for an example.

### 3.2. Interviews

In seven different occasions, interviews were conducted to different teachers of different school levels. These teachers also conducted different subject classes, which provided a wide spectrum of opinions and perspectives in the Japanese System. Among the teachers interviewed were an Elementary School Principal, as well as a teacher; in the Junior High School Level, teachers of the subjects of English, Math, and Science were interviewed; and finally a Japanese Teacher of a Technical Senior High School also collaborated with the study. These teachers all work in the city of Morioka, of Iwate Prefecture.

During these interviews, special attention was paid to three focus questions:

1. Since students do not repeat grades until they reach Senior High School level, what happens with the cases in which students show deficiencies?
2. How are students evaluated in different areas and levels?
3. How is discipline so well maintained inside a classroom?

#### 3.2.1. Students who show deficiencies in a grade level.

Throughout the study, one of the characteristics of the Japanese Educational Systems that is very unique compared to El Salvador, is the fact that students are automatically promoted to the next grade level. Grade levels are categorized according to age and not academic achievement, up until Third Year of Junior High School, which would be an equivalent to ninth grade in El Salvador.

On the other hand, El Salvador has as a rule that after fourth grade, fourth year of elementary school in Japan, students who have not demonstrated the level of academic achievement the grade requires must repeat the school year. With this main difference in mind, the question: "Since students do not repeat grades until they reach Senior High School level, what happens with the cases in which students show deficiencies?" was asked to the teachers being interviewed.

Surprisingly, all the teachers participating in the interviews had a similar answer. They all agreed in the idea the teacher is the one responsible of helping the student reach the level of academic achievement for him or her to move with the necessary knowledge into the next grade level. Whenever a student demonstrates there is a difficulty in keeping up with the class, the teacher pays closer attention to him or her. As mentioned in the interviews, sometimes teachers ask students to stay during break time or lunch for them to be able to explain thoroughly and clear any doubts these students might have. Even, special cram schools are recommended for the improvement of this student.

Throughout the different interviews, it became clear that for teachers are very involved in the learning process of their students. For them, identifying difficulties and finding solutions is an important responsibility. These changes the perspective of students having a deficiency in learning; instead, teachers view it as a challenge to overcome.

### *3.2.2. Students' evaluations in different areas and levels.*

The second focus question asked was regarding the evaluation system. They kindly and thoroughly explained how students were evaluated in each of the different areas; and after having established the main differences between both systems, the teachers explained that the evaluation system, for them, is very complex. They work with a rubric system that allows them to choose the best option to complete each of the students' report cards. Every letter, A, B, or C has a series of requirements necessary to be fulfilled.

Also, there was a constant reference to the amount of time they, teachers, spent with their students inside and outside a classroom, and during club activities. This allows teachers to get to know students in every aspect of their daily life, making the process of evaluation a much more complete one. Even though teachers commented it was a very meticulous system, they explained that even though students cannot repeat a grade level, giving the correct feedback to them and their parents is of the highest importance.

### *3.2.3. Discipline inside a classroom.*

Throughout this study, there was the opportunity of observe classes and even be part of them; one of the most outstanding characteristics of these experiences were the good discipline kept inside the classroom by the students. Classroom management problems seemed to be nonexistent: students followed instructions without any complain or objection, they were all sitting down attentive to the class and teachers' instructions.

It is quite a sight.

On the other hand, classrooms in El Salvador, usually count with more than one student who seems to be too active to stay seated in class, there is usually another student or more who are easily distracted; or even there are students who do not follow instructions or complete their work. These are common disciplinary problems that were not visible as classes in Iwate Prefecture were visited, which is the reason why the question of: "How is discipline so well maintained inside a classroom?" was so significant.

The teachers from the Elementary School Level explained that first year students are the ones who show more difficulty, in terms of discipline. They are new to the School System and teachers dedicate long periods of time for students to learn how to organize their time and space. They have to make sure students are prepared to start learning, first; this is why understanding the importance of discipline takes such a long and detailed process; but once it is clearly learned and applied, discipline inside a classroom is successful.

In general terms, it can be summarized that Japanese students clearly understand that a classroom is the place where they come to learn, and not play. Teachers seemed intrigued with the question itself due to the fact that these should not be existing problems inside a classroom, especially since students have a time and place to get distracted and enjoy themselves outside a classroom.

## **4. Analysis**

After the analysis of all data collected, there were three main ideas to ponder about. First, teachers in Japan are a great influence and motor in the Educational System. They have the ability to influence the ones around them and have a direct effect on their students' academic results. Talking to teachers in Iwate made it clear they understand their responsibility and the importance of their role; therefore, they dedicate

a lot of time, energy and effort to achieve success through their students. This mentality is a motivation for everyone (schools, parents, and teachers) to work the best way possible alongside teachers. Teachers' professional development should be a priority in El Salvador's educational system in order to improve the results obtained in its schools.

In Japan, teachers, parents, and students understand they are all responsibly involved in the learning process; a student's result is not only a teacher's responsibility. This should be a great example for El Salvador's education. Official statistics demonstrate that students graduating from the public educational system do not reach the minimum grade established by the Ministry of Education, proving there must be a change in order to see different results. The results so far, have demonstrated a disconnection among the three different groups previously mentioned.

Second, when all the people involved in a learning process responsibly take their part, an evaluation grade does not become a determining point. Since in El Salvador, there is a minimum grade requirement to be fulfilled in order to be promoted to the next grade level, it became logical to question what happens in the case of students in Japan who do not reach their minimum requirements. However, after long conversations with the teachers interviewed and the analysis of the data, it became clear that since teachers do not have "failing a student" as an option, this does not become an existing problem. Teachers make sure everyone involved in the process (students, parents and themselves) take action as the difficulty arises in order to make it disappear. When this is accomplished, automatic promotion appears logical rather than debatable.

Finally, in the case of a developing country, like El Salvador, whose Educational System has been highly deteriorated, it is necessary to start proposing changes that involve the community and can be done in steps. Keeping realistic ideas should provide a

long-term outcome. This is why starting by grade levels, like elementary school, and monitoring these changes' progresses as students move higher into the educational system seems to be a feasible project to realize.

## 5. Conclusion

After several months of investigation and study of the Japanese and El Salvador's educational systems, it became clear that imitating a country's system completely will never guarantee the same results, and it is not the objective of this study. However, it is possible that studying specific characteristics of one can provide the others with examples to find ways in which similar results can be achieved.

In terms of education, Japan can be described as an example of not only a developed country, but a country with a developed culture. People take responsibility in wanting to improve their opportunities and work hard to achieve success by working together in order for a system to work effectively. This fact is, without a doubt, a great example to others, especially countries like El Salvador, who are in a constant struggle to overcome social and economic difficulties.

Taking example of countries with a successful Educational System can be a great platform to begin changing to improvement. Starting by the first grade levels and dedicating time for teachers, parents, and students to get involved in this development would be a great way of planting a seed for future changes. Having these three groups to get involved in the process of learning can bring positive results; once everyone responsibly takes their role achieving minimum grades or even adopting an automatic promotion system will only be a characteristic of a successful educational practice. Even though a country's Educational system cannot be changed with only one case study, it's important to have in mind it all starts with small changes that in the long term will bring great outcomes for a country.

### 6. Acknowledgments

The author would like to express her gratitude towards the participants in this study: every teacher interviewed who dedicated of their busy schedule to discuss all questions asked, the three interpreters whose valuable help made this study possible; and the priceless guidance of Prof. Ookawara for his great support in this project.

### 7. Appendix

7.1 Example of a Report Card of the first year of elementary school in Morioka from the Prefecture of Iwate, Japan.

7.2 Example of the National Certificate from the Ministry of Education of the first year of elementary school in El Salvador.

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