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An Educational and Cultural Odyssey: A Teacher's Perspective on the Japanese Education System

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Abstract:

This paper delves into the extraordinary experience of an Indian high school teacher who participated in a week-long teacher exchange program in Japan, organized by ACCU (Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO) in collaboration with CEE (Centre for Environment Education). The author had the privilege of visiting three diverse schools in Tokyo, ranging from Kindergarten to Senior High School. They also engaged in insightful discussions with Japanese educators from various institutions. The paper provides a detailed account of the author's observations, encompassing educational structures, curriculum design, cultural nuances, pedagogical philosophies, and classroom practices. By contrasting the educational landscapes of Japan, a developed nation, and India, a developing country, the paper aims to illuminate potential areas for cross-cultural learning and collaborative partnerships.

Keywords: Cross-cultural comparison, teacher exchange program, global citizenship, student-centred learning

1. Introduction:

I have been selected for participation in the “9th Invitation Programme for Teachers from India”. This is a Teachers Exchange Programme between India-Japan which has been co-organized by the Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU) and Centre for Environment Education since 2016. The programme is being done with the support from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), Japan and cooperation of the Ministry of Education (MoE) India.

I'm thrilled to share that I've been given a wonderful opportunity to participate in this program, building on my years of collaboration with CEE. The selection process was truly engaging; after enthusiastic teachers submitted their forms, a lively group discussion helped finalize the participants. It's incredibly rewarding to be part of this initiative!

Theme of the Program: Exploration of Proactive and Collaborative Learning toward the Realization of Sustainable Society

2. Background of the Program:

In line with the principles of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Asia-Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU), in close collaboration with



people from the Asia-Pacific region, promotes regional cooperation and exchange in the fields of education and culture to contribute to the promotion of mutual understanding and the realisation of a sustainable society. To foster mutual understanding and friendship between countries in the Asia-Pacific region, the ACCU, in partnership with the government of Japan, initiated international exchange programmes for 'teachers' who exert a great influence on children who will create the future. Since its establishment in 2001, more than 5000 teachers from Japan, South Korea, China, Thailand and India have participated in this programme. This exchange programme provides relevant activities amongst teachers to deepen their mutual understanding of the educational system, educational practices and cultures; thus, to facilitate the transformation of teachers into proactive 'change-makers'. By passing on the learnings of teachers gained from the exchange to students, colleagues and communities, the programme aims to create a peaceful and sustainable society where cultural diversity is duly respected.

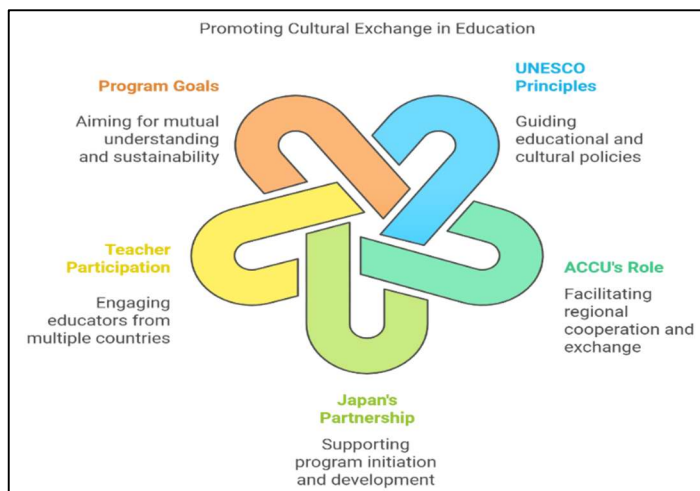


Figure No.1: Cultural Exchange in Education

Source: www.napkin.ai

In 2016, the international exchange programme between India and Japan, called the 'Invitation Programme for Teachers from India', began in close cooperation amongst the Ministry of Education (MoE), Government of India, Centre for Environment Education (CEE) and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT). This year, ACCU has organised the 9th programme both online and in person, and invited 12 teachers and other educational personnel from India.

3. Goals and Objectives of the program:

- (i) **Deepen cross-cultural understanding:** Foster a deeper understanding of Japan among participating teachers and promote mutual learning and friendship between Indian and Japanese educators and students.



- (ii) **Facilitate professional networking:** Cultivate a robust network among teachers through collaborative activities conducted during the program.
- (iii) **Stimulate forward-thinking educational dialogue:** Provide a platform for Indian and Japanese teachers to collaboratively explore and define the evolving roles of education and educators in a new age.
- (iv) **Empower educators as change-makers:** Equip teachers to disseminate their learning to students, colleagues, and communities, driving educational change towards a peaceful and sustainable society.
- (v) **Advance global educational paradigms:** Promote the application of Education for International Understanding (EIU), Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), and Global Citizenship Education (GCED) at the school level, with a focus on "Exploration of Proactive and Collaborative Learning toward the Realization of Sustainable Society."

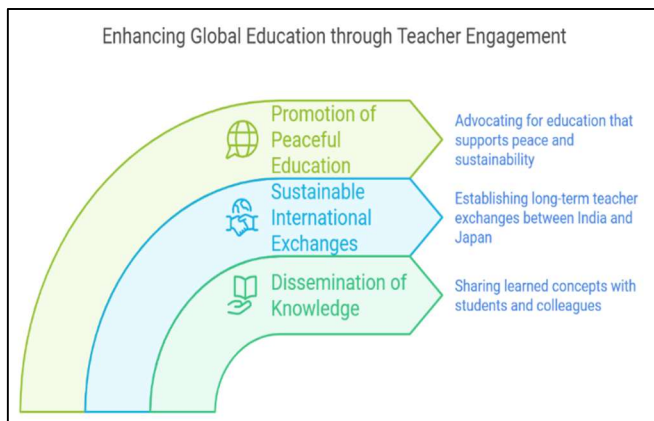


Figure No. 2: Expected Outcomes

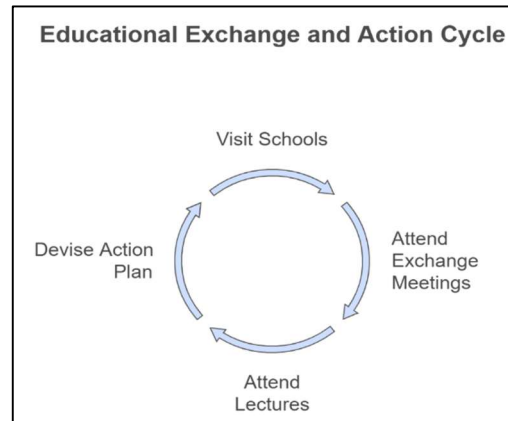
Source: www.napkin.ai

Figure No. 3: Program Activities

Source: www.napkin.ai

6. Personal Motivation for Participating in the Program:

As an educator, I have always been passionate about fostering global understanding and preparing my students for an interconnected world. The opportunity to participate in a teacher exchange program in Japan would be a transformative experience, allowing me to broaden my horizons, enhance my teaching practices, and inspire my students. Japan, with its rich cultural heritage, technological advancements, and emphasis on discipline and respect, offers a unique learning environment. Immersing myself in this culture would provide invaluable insights into alternative educational philosophies and methodologies. I was always eager to observe firsthand how Japanese teachers engage their students, manage classrooms, and foster a love for learning.

By interacting with Japanese educators, I hope to establish lasting professional relationships and collaborate on innovative teaching strategies. Sharing experiences and best practices would



undoubtedly enrich my own teaching repertoire and benefit my students. Additionally, learning about the Japanese education system would provide a comparative perspective, enabling me to critically evaluate and improve my own teaching approaches.

Beyond professional development, I was excited about the personal growth that this exchange program would offer. Experiencing a different culture, language, and way of life would broaden my worldview and enhance my intercultural competence. This enriched perspective would undoubtedly make me a more empathetic and understanding educator, capable of fostering a more inclusive and culturally responsive classroom.

The program unfolded in the vibrant capital of Tokyo, a city that has always held a special place in my heart since childhood. The pages of our textbooks, filled with tales of the majestic Mt. Fuji and the poignant history of Hiroshima, ignited a lifelong dream to explore this enchanting land. When the opportunity to participate in this program arose, I was overwhelmed with excitement at the prospect of visiting the "Land of the Rising Sun," a destination that had captivated my imagination for years.

As an Indian teacher immersed in the heart of Tokyo, I've been privileged to experience the rich tapestry of Japanese culture, albeit from within the confines of the program's schedule. Through cultural workshops, lectures, and interactions with local educators, I've gained valuable insights into the intricate art of origami, the elegance of calligraphy, and the profound respect for nature embodied in Zen philosophy. While physical exploration of local sites was limited, the cultural immersion provided a profound understanding of Japanese customs, traditions, and the unique perspectives of this fascinating culture.

Immersing myself in the vibrant culture of Tokyo, I encountered the challenges and rewards of intercultural communication. Language barriers often posed hurdles, but the presence of interpreters throughout the program facilitated meaningful interactions. Through shared experiences, gestures, and a willingness to understand, I forged connections with local educators, transcending linguistic differences. These encounters broadened my perspective, fostering a deeper appreciation for the diverse ways in which cultures express themselves and interact with the world.

7. Summary of Our School Visit:

(1) Journey from India to Japan:

Our journey began in Delhi, leading us to Haneda Airport in Tokyo. Upon arrival, we were warmly welcomed by ACCU representatives. The day commenced with an orientation session, providing



insights into the program. Subsequently, ACCU organized a local sightseeing tour to the Metropolitan Government Building, the administrative hub of Tokyo.

(2) School Visit in Japan:

From the following day, our school visits commenced. Our first destination was Koshigawakita Senior High School, renowned for its designation as a Super Science School. We toured various facilities, including well-equipped laboratories. In the physics lab, we observed students engaged in a hands-on experiment to create Diwali lanterns, and we had the opportunity to assist them. We also explored libraries and classrooms, gaining insights into the learning environment. The school's cultural club graciously performed a harp recital. Post-lunch, students presented their research work through engaging PowerPoint presentations. After the student presentations, we engaged in a fruitful discussion with the teachers. This provided an opportunity to exchange insights on the Japanese education system and share perspectives on our own educational approaches.



Pic-1: Making Lantern in Physics Lab



Pic- 2: In the Canteen



Pic-3: In the Kindergarten

The following day proved to be exceptionally exciting as we ventured to Yuri Kaga Kindergarten, nestled amidst a serene village and lush forest which is called Satoyama. Unlike traditional schools, the children here learn through hands-on experiences, engaging in activities like play, making threads, doing dye, rearing flying squirrels, rat snakes cultivating rice, and celebrating rice ball ceremonies. Upon entering the school, we saw students practicing drills skipping and other different activities for their annual sports day. Truly, they are children of nature, learning from and within their natural surroundings. We had the privilege of introducing them to the practice of YOGA.

On the final day of our school visits, we headed to Kuki Elementary School. We explored classrooms and introduced the students to a captivating blend of Indian culture, including Bollywood dance, yoga, and Vedic math. The children were particularly enthralled by the vibrant dance performance. The day concluded with a press meet, where we shared our experiences and insights.



Pic-4: Yoga Session



Pic- 5: Dance Session



Pic-6: In Classroom

(3) Student – Teacher Ratio:

The classrooms generally have a 40:1 student-teacher ratio. All the schools we've visited share a common trait: their buildings are adorned with student-crafted decorations made from recycled materials. A unique practice in every school we visited was a mandatory shoe exchange. We had to remove our shoes and wear a pair of communal slippers provided by the school. This rule applied equally to both students and teachers.

8. The Education System:

The education system is organized into 6-3-3-4 structure. 6 years for elementary school with 3 years of Junior high school is mandatory for all children, starting at the age of six. Six compulsory subjects in Japanese junior high school are Japanese language, social science, mathematics, science, English, physical education.

15-18 years for high school education which is optional. Upon completion of senior high school, students typically sit for entrance exams to gain admission to universities or junior colleges. There are two streams in senior high school viz. general stream and science stream. In general stream students can choose subjects like commerce, industrial architecture, economics, agriculture, foreign language (like English, Dutch, French), nursing etc. In science stream students have to study Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics and Biology.

The typical school day lasts six hours, while on Saturdays, it is reduced to four hours. However, senior secondary students preparing for final exams may extend their stay for an additional three to four hours. Teachers are also available during these extended hours to provide support and guidance.

The higher education generally spans 4 years. 10% of the students go up to university level. While the system is rigorous, Japanese education places significant emphasis on moral values, discipline, and respect for authority. The majority of elementary schools in Japan are public institutions, while the ratio of public to private schools in junior and senior high school is approximately 60:40.

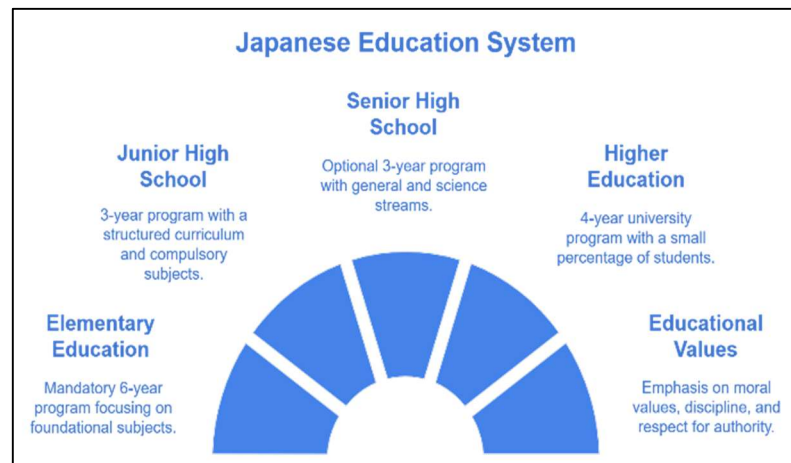


Figure No. 4: Japanese Education System

Source: www.napkin.ai

9. Evaluation System:

Evaluation system is based on three key components:

- (i) **Knowledge and Skills:** Assessed through traditional pen-and-paper exams.
- (ii) **Critical Thinking:** Evaluated through problem-solving, analysis, and creative thinking skills.
- (iii) **Motivation and Engagement:** Measured by factors such as self-initiative, attendance, timely submission of assignments, and active participation in class.

Instead of a traditional marking system, a grading system is employed to assess student performance.

10. Service Criteria of the Teachers:

Government school teachers are appointed by the local municipality. Their Qualification, License and Retirement age are as follows.

- (i) **Graduation:** Completion of a university degree from any recognized institution.
- (ii) **Teacher License:** Possession of a valid teaching license, subject to renewal every five years.
- (iii) **Retirement Age:** Compulsory retirement upon reaching the age of 60.
- (iv) **Principal's Age and Experience:** Minimum age of 35 years with a minimum of 10 years of teaching experience.

11. Notable Facilities in Japanese schools:

- Approximately **1.6 million** yen was allocated for the school library in a single fiscal year.
- In today's digital age, approximately **70%** of students still utilize the school library.
- Every school has a **cultural club** where students practice various musical instruments.
- Each elementary school employs a foreign language teacher who specializes in English.



12. Interaction with Teacher from other Countries:

We interact with a teacher from the Philippines who teaches at Kuki Elementary School and three other schools in Saitama Prefecture.

- All students utilize tablets in the classroom, eliminating the need to carry heavy textbooks. The textbooks are stored in the classroom for reference.
- Students utilize the **BENESSE** app, a government-developed platform, for their studies. This app contains digital textbooks and allows students to provide feedback on each class, reflecting on their learning.
- Every school provides a **midday meal program**, similar to the Indian public school system. Senior secondary schools have their own dedicated canteens.
- Students are responsible for maintaining the cleanliness of their classrooms, toilets, and canteen areas after school hours.
- Every week, students attend a guest lecture by experts from various countries on diverse topics, ranging from strawberry cultivation in Nepal to fashion business in Kenya, food court management in Kenya, and cultural research from Denmark.

Unlike India, Japan does not experience significant brain drain, and relatively few students pursue higher education in Western countries.

13. Classroom Observations from Three Different Types School Visits: -

13.1 Classroom Environment:

- (i) **Minimalist Design:** Classrooms were simple, clean, and clutter-free, fostering a calm and focused learning environment.
- (ii) **Student Autonomy:** Students were encouraged to take ownership of their learning, with a strong emphasis on self-directed study.
- (iii) **Technology Integration:** Technology was seamlessly integrated into the curriculum, often used for research, presentations, and collaborative projects.

13.2 Teaching Methodology:

- (i) **Language of instruction:** The medium of instruction in all schools is Japanese.
- (ii) **Problem-Based Learning:** A significant portion of the curriculum was based on problem-solving and critical thinking.
- (iii) **Collaborative Learning:** Group work and peer-to-peer learning were common practices, promoting teamwork and communication skills.
- (iv) **Experiential Learning:** Field trips and hands-on activities were frequently incorporated to enhance learning.



- (v) **Textbooks:** Japanese textbooks are visually captivating, with their distinctive design and layout.

13.3 Student Behaviour and Discipline:

- (i) **Respect for Teachers and Peers:** Students exhibited a high level of respect for authority and their classmates.
- (ii) **Student-Led Cleanliness Initiative:** By entrusting students with the responsibility of maintaining classroom, toilet, and canteen cleanliness, schools cultivate a sense of ownership and environmental consciousness among young learners.
- (iii) **Self-Discipline:** Students were expected to manage their own time and behaviour, with minimal teacher intervention.
- (iv) **Focus and Engagement:** Students were highly engaged in their studies, with a strong work ethic.
- (v) **Peer-to-Peer dining:** Students foster camaraderie and independence by serving meals to their peers and clean the dishes afterwards, promoting a sense of community and responsibility within the classroom.



Pic-7: PPT Presentation by the students in Senior High School



Pic- 8: Harp playing



Pic- 9: Welcome in Kindergarten

14. Some Special Observations During the School Visit:

I want to share some insights into the innovative educational approaches I have witnessed during Japan school visit. One particularly striking example was the emphasis on project-based learning, where students actively engage in real-world projects, applying their knowledge and skills to solve authentic problems like how to make a safety lantern in the time of natural disaster by using the principle of luminosity or trisects of an angle by using origami. On the first day, the students of Senior high school presented their research through ppt. They have collected data, they have done mathematical modelling and analyzed the data and this approach fosters critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration, preparing students for the complexities of the 21st century.



On the third day at the kindergarten, as we were about to leave the school premises, I witnessed a heartwarming sight. A young girl, exhausted from a bicycle ride, was being carried to her classroom by her teacher in her lap. The image resonated with me, highlighting the school's emphasis on natural activities for children. The teacher's nurturing gesture exemplified the school's commitment to fostering a supportive and caring environment.

On the fourth day in the Elementary School, I was astonished to witness a display of self-sufficiency and cooperation. The children were entrusted with the task of serving their own meals to their classmates. With care and consideration, they carried trays of food into the classroom, sharing their portions with their peers. Once finished, they diligently cleaned their utensils and helped tidy up the classroom. This experience exemplified the school's commitment to fostering a sense of independence and teamwork among the young learners.



Pic- 10: Making thread



Pic- 11: Students are serving mid-day meal to their peer group



Pic-12:Text Book of Class IV

15. Other Activities in the Program:

A courtesy call at the Japanese embassy took place in the afternoon of the third day of our visit in Japan. It was a formal visit to express gratitude for the opportunity and to strengthen ties between the two countries. We met the hon'ble Indian Ambassador Sibi George, who presented a PowerPoint on the role of embassies in foreign countries. This provided a chance to introduce ourselves, discuss the exchange program's goals, and seek advice or support. The visit involved exchanging gifts, engaging in polite conversation, and leaving a positive impression.

On the last day there was a group discussion session with the Japanese teachers followed by a local sight- seeing tour guided by those teachers. The group discussion proved to be a valuable exchange of educational insights. Our Japanese counterparts expressed keen interest in understanding our instructional languages and the unique concept of public-private boards.

As we delved into the intricacies of our respective systems, a fruitful dialogue ensued. The collaborative spirit fostered during the discussion led to two Japanese teachers expressing a desire to explore potential partnerships with our institution. One of them holds a 10 months

certificate course in Hindi from Allahabad University. And the other is the Internal Affairs Coordinator from Koshigawakita Senior High School.



Pic- 13: Discussion session with the Japanese teachers



Pic- 14: Instrument playing lessons

Following the discussion, we exchanged gifts individually. A teacher who is also a renowned musician, taught us to play various instruments, led a delightful session. We had lunch with our Japanese teacher at an Indian restaurant, sharing cultural insights. Later, we visited Sensoji Temple with them as our local guides, enjoying a shopping excursion together.

16. Summery:

The teacher exchange program provided a valuable opportunity to:

- (i) **Share Best Practices:** Engaged in discussions with Japanese teachers to share insights into teaching methodologies, curriculum development, and classroom management.
- (ii) **Observe Classroom Practices:** Witnessed firsthand the implementation of innovative teaching strategies and assess their effectiveness.
- (iii) **Cultural Exchange:** Immersed ourselves in Japanese culture, understanding the values and beliefs that shape their educational system.
- (iv) **Professional Development:** Gained new perspectives and insights that can be applied to our own teaching practices.

17. Key Takeaways and Recommendations:

- (i) **Embrace Minimalism:** Create clutter-free learning environments to enhance focus and productivity.
- (ii) **Promote Student Autonomy:** Encourage students to take ownership of their learning through self-directed study and project-based learning.
- (iii) **Integrate Technology Effectively:** Utilize technology to support learning and enhance engagement.



- (iv) **Foster Collaborative Learning:** Promote group work and peer-to-peer learning to develop social and communication skills.
- (v) **Prioritize Experiential Learning:** Incorporate field trips and hands-on activities to make learning more meaningful.
- (vi) **Cultivate Respect and Self-Discipline:** Establish clear expectations and model appropriate behaviour.
- (vii) **Continue International Exchange:** Encourage further participation in teacher exchange programs to broaden horizons and foster global connections.

18. Conclusion:

The visit to Japanese schools and participation in the teacher exchange program were invaluable experiences. The insights gained from observing Japanese educational practices and interacting with Japanese teachers can be applied to improve our own teaching and learning environments. By embracing these practices and fostering a culture of continuous improvement, we can strive to provide our students with a high-quality education that prepares them for the future.

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