

# A Comparative Study of Primary Assessment Systems in Japan and Australia

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It is possible, however, to take a very different perspective on reporting if we view learning as an ongoing process that transcends particular teachers, classrooms, grades, and even schools and jurisdictions. (Forster, 2005, p. 16)

## **Introduction**

This research project considers and compares assessment systems used in Japan and Australia at the Elementary School level. The purpose is to identify functional differences in methods of conducting assessment and reporting grades in the two countries. The study was undertaken because we believed there were likely to be significant differences in the methods of assessment as well as the underlying philosophies of learning that guided education policy at the Elementary School level in the two countries. The authors have been involved in the primary education systems in both countries through the education of their children during the past six years. The children are Australian nationals who have lived and been schooled mostly in Japan, with routine visits twice a year to also attend an elementary school in Australia for two month periods each time. The elder child has attended the elementary schools for at least six years, and the younger child has attended for at least three years. The discussion and analysis presented in this study is hence based

on research into the two education systems, in combination with the authors' personal experience as parents of children attending primary schools in each country.

### Approaches to Primary Learning

Different approaches to primary learning between Japan and English-speaking countries are evident in previous research studies. McPake and Powney (1998) in their comparison of Japanese and British educational philosophies argue that British education is characterised by the children learning to draw on multiple sources of information, developing critical skills and having their own opinion, whereas Japanese children acquire a “vast knowledge bank” (p. 174) which is made possible by attending to teacher and textbook, and developing extensive memorization skills. Given such differences in the approaches to primary education, it is likely that notable differences will be apparent in the assessment systems used in each country.

It is also probable that a major factor in the development of the Japanese early education system has been the difficulties of learning a more complex writing system. A major reason why children in Japan could require more frequent testing may be the greater orthographic depth of Japanese, as compared to English. Ellis, Natsume, Stavropoulou, et al. (2004) completed a detailed study of the relationship between orthographic depth and reading acquisition of Albanian, Greek, English, and the Japanese syllabaries of *hiragana* and *kanji*. They consider *hiragana* to be the most transparent orthography, followed by Greek, English, and *kanji*. They conclude that the difficulty of learning to read aloud is relative to orthographic transparency; hence *kanji* is much more difficult for children to learn to read aloud than *hiragana*: “Children schooled in these writing systems have greater difficulty and take longer in achieving this goal” (2004, p. 455).

If the acquisition of Japanese were limited to *hiragana* at the primary level,

one could speculate that Japanese schools would devote less time to testing than English-speaking countries because the more transparent writing system would require less time to be mastered and could be more directly used as a medium for learning other material. However, given the inherent difficulties of learning *kanji* in addition to *hiragana*, and particularly the associated degree of opaqueness of the orthographical system, a technique involving intensive memorization would appear to be necessary to produce effective results on the current curriculum.

In two previous studies undertaken by the authors, Stephens (2002) and Stephens and Blight (2002) related differences in the Australian and Japanese approach to early literacy education in terms of the different goals of self-expression and accuracy of form. Beginning writers in Australian classrooms are permitted to use 'invented spellings' based on the rationale that children should first learn to express themselves, and subsequently develop their spelling skills. Correct spelling is consequently not insisted upon in the early stages of free writing. In Japanese schools, however, children learn early to use pencils and erasers in free writing exercises so that any errors that occur can be promptly corrected. This system of writing leads to compositions with considerably fewer errors than the Australian samples, since an initial emphasis is placed on developing accuracy of form. However, it also seems likely that the emphasis on accuracy would place greater demands on children to master written conventions at an earlier stage. As a consequence, children are required to spend more time on drill practice and memorization activities at an early age. Similar drill activities were not frequently observed in Australia, where the children were encouraged to compose their writing without having initially mastered the spelling conventions. They consequently made more frequent form errors, but this pattern was associated with a higher degree of tolerance of errors exhibited by the teachers. The different approaches to education between the two countries would again appear to tend towards the more frequent

usage of testing in the Japanese context at the primary school level.

## Methodology

The methodology used in this study is based on longitudinal observations of the two children's experiences attending elementary schools in the two countries. The observation period spanned the full six years of the Japanese primary school system and most of the eight years of the Australian primary school system. In addition, closer investigations of the assessment systems were conducted at the Year 3 and Year 6 levels at the Japanese primary school, and at the Year 4 and Year 7 levels at the Australian primary school. The children attended the year level appropriate to their ages in each country, but were in different year levels in the two countries because of the different starting ages for elementary schools in Japan and Australia.

Samples of tests and report cards were collected throughout the observation period, so that any differences apparent between the assessment systems used in the two countries could be identified. The Japanese data collected include class report cards, results for the Prefectural Tests at the Year 4 and Year 5 level, portfolios of schoolwork and tests, and policy materials downloaded from the Education Ministry (MEXT: <[www.mext.go.jp](http://www.mext.go.jp)>). The Australian data collected include a portfolio of schoolwork undertaken at various years and in different subjects, a number of class tests (mostly spelling tests, since this was the most common form of testing employed in the Australian school), and results reported on the State Literacy and Numeracy (LAN) tests at the Year 3 and Year 5 levels.

In the following section of the paper, differences observed between the two assessment systems are discussed in relation to both parental expectations and published research on the two education systems. While we regard it as unlikely that we will be able to produce conclusive results through the present study, we believe

it is inherently valuable to investigate and compare the purpose and methodologies of primary education as represented in contemporary Australian pedagogy, and as available on the MEXT website (in Japanese).

## Discussion of Findings

### *A Culture of Systematic Measurement in Japan*

The recording of precise measurements is a cultural trend which appears to permeate many aspects of life in Japan. No doubt the routine practice of systematic measurements has led to the country's high reputation in creating precision instruments in industries such as medical equipment, computers, and technology. What is interesting though is that this aspect of culture is not limited to industrial applications, but extends to many other areas of the society. Whereas, for example, westerners might ascertain the seriousness of a child's temperature by referring to a general impression gained by touching the child's forehead, Japanese parents are likely to measure and then record their child's temperature to one decimal point, and then to repeat this process frequently during the period of illness to monitor any variation. Similarly, when attending a Japanese paediatrician the temperature is automatically taken, regardless of the purpose of the consultation. Annual health checks at businesses and companies are also often conducted as the process of recording a series of measurements which are needed for comparison to previous years, as well as to future years data.

Measurement is also an extremely important feature of education in Japan, both in terms of frequency and degree. Details of children's growth are recorded meticulously each year in terms of both height and weight changes. Children sometimes line up in order of their height in the class and are consequently made aware of how they compare to the other children. Systematic measurement appears

to be an important feature of most classes at school, and not just in terms of recording test scores for their schoolwork. For example, in physical education (PE) classes children run an annual marathon and are informed of their finishing place in the entire year level, so they can attempt to improve their performance the following year. In winter, children are assigned skipping exercises for PE homework, and the various exercises are described in detail, including skipping forwards, skipping backwards, and double skips. Children are then also tested on the skipping steps in the PE class. Another example taken from PE classes involves precisely measuring times for running various distance races.

In addition to the practice of frequent measurement, there appears to be an associated requirement for recording intrinsic detail. Class absences, for example, are recorded in Japanese schools in terms of non-attendance for either “officially accepted reasons” or for “unexplained reasons”. Parents regard this classification extremely seriously and attempt to minimize any “unexplained absences”, since these reflect badly on their child (and also themselves as parents) and will be featured on the report cards as a permanent record. Attendance records do not generally feature in the same way in Australian report cards, and are not reported in terms of categories of absence.

Given the underlying cultural emphasis on frequent measurement, we were not surprised to observe in our study that a child’s learning progress was more frequently tested in the Japanese school. Children used prescribed textbooks for Japanese (*Kokugo*), Maths, Science, Social Studies, Music, and Art, and were regularly tested on the textbook material in all subjects except Art and Music. After marking, the tests were also sometimes sent home so that parents’ could independently monitor their child’s progress, before returning the test to school for filing in the child’s class folder.

### ***A Different Culture of Assessment in Australia***

By way of contrast, we observed in the Australian school much less emphasis on measurement and reporting generally at the primary level. For example, a child's height and weight was not routinely measured and students were not required to line up in order of their height. There was also no general perception evident from parents of the importance of attending school for the purpose of maintaining a good attendance record. While education is viewed in both cultures in terms of achieving the important goals of learning and socialization, in Australia achieving exacting attendance requirements was regarded as less of an objective in itself.

The lower frequency of practising assessment in Australian primary schools can be related to underlying pedagogical beliefs, as represented in contemporary education research. Indeed, the influence of a movement to oppose norm-referenced testing which commenced in the early 1970's appears to still be prevalent. The purpose of education is usually considered in terms of children's intrinsic development, rather than for the attainment of a particular grade level. Indeed, Wilson's original argument is regarded as persuasive even today: "working for grades rather than for more direct self-fulfilment has a constrictive and narrowing effect on their learning, and tends to discourage divergent thinking and activities" (1972, p. 7). More recently, Reeves expressed a similar disinclination to situations where: "the impulse to be above average takes precedence over the demand for knowledge" (2005, p. 11). Criticisms of norm-referenced assessment were often related to serious negative consequences for the fifty percent of students who are essentially labelled as being 'below-average' :

For students of lower ability, who almost invariably find themselves categorized as unsatisfactory or as failures, there is little doubt that such evaluation produces considerable emotional threat, is destructive to their self-

concepts as learners, and thus inhibits their motivation and ability to learn .... There is ample research evidence that blame and castigation is more likely to inhibit response, than to inspire better performance or more learning. (Wilson, 1972, p. 8)

The argument against norm-referenced assessment persists today for precisely the same reasons: “Will the retention rate for lower ability students decline as they are locked into a destructive cycle of failure? If it does, how will that help Australia as a nation? How does A to E reporting generate a positive learning climate for at-risk students who are already alienated by schools and systems?” (King, 2006, p. 25). A similar tendency also applies to testing in schools. Mendelovitis argues “Australian educators are generally hostile to standardised tests” and further, that “... [t]he idea that standardised tests dominate the teaching of English or any other subject in Australia is laughable” (2005, p. 7). Hence for years there was little norm-reference assessment in primary schools: “most schools across Australia have long given up allocating marks or letter grades — especially in the primary years. Teachers argue that grading children from A to E is meaningless as children learn at different rates and are often at different stages of learning” (Maslen, 2004, p. 13).

However, academic testing in Australia has become increasingly rigorous in recent years, particularly due to the increased need to provide accountability regarding the use of public funds:

Underlying the current national curriculum and assessment agenda are the assumptions that greater accountability leads to improvements in teaching and learning in schools, and that these improvements result in enhanced student outcomes. (Cooney, 2006, p. 48)

The movement towards more accountability began in the early 1990's with the *National Curriculum Statements and Profiles to the Literacy and Numeracy Benchmarks in Years 3, 5, and 7* in the mid 1990's. Furthermore, now there is the impetus generated by international tests such as the *Program for International Assessment (PISA)* and the *Third International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS)* (Mann, 2005; also see Fehring, 2005 for an overview of individual states assessment procedures). The next move due to be implemented by 2008 involves developing national assessment standards at Years 3, 5, 7, and 9 in accordance with the Schools Assistance (“Learning Together – Achievement through Choice and Opportunity”) Act, 2004 (Cooney, 2006, p. 30).

There has recently also been a major policy shift towards the use of “plain English” in Australian primary schools. The incorporation of standard forms of plain English in assessment reporting was one of the election pledges of the Howard government (Maslen, 2004). The objective of the language is “*to be readily understood by the parents, guardians or other persons who have care and control of the child*” (DECS, 2005, p. 2). However, it has also been argued by the former Education Minister (Dr. Brendan Nelson) in 2004, that information was being withheld from parents because of the perceived necessity of using “politically correct” reporting language (Maslen, 2004). To illustrate the significance of this point, Table 1 indicates how the language has changed in report cards in 1971 (Wilson, 1972, p. 33) and 2005 (DECS, 2005, p. 3) for the five A-E grade levels.

**Table 1. Comparison of Grading Language**

	1971	2005
A	Superior attainment	Outstanding achievement
B	Average attainment using moderate effort	High achievement
C	Average attainment achieved by commendable effort	Satisfactory achievement
D	Attainment below average for age, but effort sufficient to ensure improvement	Limited achievement
E	Low attainment with little apparent effort to improve	Low achievement

### ***Comparison of Summative Assessment***

Japanese primary schools indicate academic performance on a three-point scale using the following levels: “very good”, “good”, or “developing”. However, there is generally no indication provided of performance relative to the class, although some schools with a more academic orientation may provide information about both children’s absolute and relative performance on standardised tests. Such tests are sometimes given in the final year of primary school so that children and parents are provided with information to assist with their preparations for entering middle schools. However, children are usually not given their percentage scores on these tests but rather just their place on a five-point scale.

By way of contrast, Australian assessment reports always indicate a child’s performance relative to their peers, at least by showing their quartile performance. This difference runs contrary to expectations based on the more comprehensive measurements and more frequent testing that occurs in Japan. Furthermore, as Japanese education is often considered to be more competitive than Australian education, one would expect that assessment relative to peers’ performance would be more likely to be reported in Japan than Australia. Indeed, this situation occurs according to expectations in Japanese middle schools, where Japanese children are informed of their ranking in their year level for each subject, as well as the average scores for each subject. It can be regarded then that children at the primary level in Japan enjoy a reprieve from the competitive pressures that typically characterise a meritocratic education system. Although it can also be considered somewhat ironic that while Australia does not share a similar culture of measurement and recording, the Australian grading system tends to provide more detail in relation to a child’s performance relative to peers in core subjects in State tests such as the Literacy and Numeracy (LAN) test. In Japan, some of this information is provided in standardised prefectural tests when students are graded out of 100, but unlike the

Australian LAN tests they are not also provided with graphs indicating their performance in relation to other children in the prefecture.

### *Comparison of Assessment Practices*

One major difference between the countries in the nature of the testing systems is the usage of standardized textbooks. Japanese children are required to use a government approved textbook for each subject, which provide a basis for regular formal tests to be conducted on the content of the textbooks. By contrast, in the Australian system there are no standardized textbooks, and the most frequent tests occurring in the Australian school were spelling tests. Children are typically given a word list to memorise each week and then given a test to check on their progress. The next most frequent type of test tended to be of the mental arithmetic type, with the teacher dictating mathematical problems for the children to solve. A formal placement test for mathematics was also typically given early in the year to determine the ability levels for streamed classes.

Other aspects of literacy and numeracy, which were usually tested in Japan, tended to be dealt with in Australia as exercises rather than as tests. The children would regularly complete worksheets which included a wide range of activities (e. g., reading comprehension, spelling and vocabulary, grammar and punctuation, dictionary skills, and compositions). Public schemes such as the *Premier's Reading Challenge* have recently also been introduced to provide incentive for children to read a list of officially prescribed books. Writing tasks utilized in the Australian primary school included descriptive writing, narrative writing (with a focus on nouns, verbs, and adjectives), and editing. Book-making was also undertaken as an activity and prizes were awarded in the *Mayoral Make a Book Competition* in order to nurture ability and publicly acknowledge talented children.

Oral language lessons included morning talks, class meetings and discussions.

Work on handwriting skills helped the development of modern cursive link script. Children were typically captivated by the teachers' dramatic reading aloud of various stories. Hence the Australian curriculum provided many opportunities for assessment of learning, but this was usually not conducted in terms of formalised tests similar to the Japanese system. Instead, a variety of stimulating and challenging tasks provided the basis for the teacher to assess children's progress in a range of areas.

In Japan there is no legal requirement to provide grade reports a certain number of times per year, but reports are issued two or three times a year. Parent teacher interviews take place at the beginning of the year, when the teacher visits the child's home, and at the end of Term One and Term Two. Most Australian states have four terms per year, but reports are issued twice a year and the parent-teacher interviews are usually held once (but sometimes twice) a year (Fehring, 2005). There is no specific requirement concerning the grading systems used in Japan, but grades are generally represented on a three-point scale (see previous section), while Australian schools are required to provide assessment on a five point scale according to public education policy.

### ***Development of National Standards for Assessment***

There is presently no standard national requirement in Japan concerning the criteria to be used for assigning grades; rather, each school has the freedom to assign grades independently (Monbukagakusho, 2006). However, a new system being introduced from 2007 will feature national testing for children at Years 6 and 9, the final years of primary and middle school. However, according to the current plan, test results will not be revealed to the children but instead solely used by educators to improve educational outcomes in future years.

This system contrasts with the practice in Australia, where all public and private schools in each of the Australian states and territories must conform to a national reporting format. Children are required to be tested in each subject and reports must be issued twice a year. Academic achievement is given on a scale of 1-5, and attitude ratings are also given on a scale of 1-3. Importantly, information must also be provided concerning the quartile of achievement the student has attained. Specific forms of testing at the State level in literacy and numeracy also occurs in Years 3, 5, and 7. Hence it is a policy requirement in Australia for children to be given detailed information concerning their performance relative to peers. While there has been considerable resistance to norm-referenced testing in Australia over recent decades, Bligh defends this practice as “the right of parents to succinct reporting of their children’s achievements against the standard expected of them” (2005, p.4). Furthermore, national tests are additionally planned to take place in Years 6 and 10, in “English, mathematics, science, civics and citizenship, and information technology” (Maslens, 2004, p. 13).

## **Remarks and Conclusions**

Firstly, we would like to acknowledge that the parental perspective provided in this study is based on an essentially incomplete understanding of the assessment culture of each system. While a series of classroom observations in each country would have given a more comprehensive picture of the two assessment systems, we feel that we have given a fair representation of the differences in educational practice based on our direct experience as parents. Furthermore, taking a parent’s perspective has provided a valuable opportunity to observe cultures from an involved and participating point of view, and as a recipient of education practices rather than as a provider of learning. The longitudinal methodology utilized in this study has

also allowed for an extended period of observation covering over six years attendance at the two schools.

To conclude this research project, it is noteworthy to mention that perhaps the most significant difference we observed is also somewhat surprising. While the Japanese assessment system appears to be based on a culture of frequent measurement and precise reporting, this pattern is not reflected in reporting practices at Japanese primary schools. For although Japan tends to use significantly more formal testing than Australia, the Australian report cards typically indicate a wider scale of achievement than equivalent Japanese report cards. Australian report cards indicate the child's progress on a five-point scale whereas Japanese report cards indicate progress on a three-point scale. Australian report cards also provide an indication of a child's progress in relation to their peers whereas Japanese report cards do not provide this type of information. The different standards of reporting can consequently be viewed as somewhat unexpected given that assessment is less frequently undertaken in Australia and generally also recorded with a higher level of detail in Japan.

It is interesting to consider possible rationales for why the Japanese education system does not reveal relative performance or provide a wider range of grades, despite often having access to more detailed information that could be provided as valuable feedback to the children. Most probably, Japanese educators are also keenly aware of the damage that can be done by labeling children as "underachievers" at such an early age. Indeed, there has been some resistance to the employment of the five-point scale in Australia (see King, 2006 ; Blair, 2005). Perhaps the Japanese system acknowledges more completely the nature of developmental learning that tends to occur at different times in a child's growth and development. It could also be argued that Australian educators should further consider the rationales employed in Japan for not labelling progress in such detail at

the Elementary School level. For as King (2006) and Blair (2005) argue, grading children means that there will inevitably be a group of children who are detrimentally identified as underachievers.

The usage of standardized textbooks in Japan provides more consistent material for testing and measuring progress, but there is also more pressure on Japanese children to memorize the textbook content. In comparison, Australian schools do not employ formal tests based on specific textbook content at the primary level. The Japanese assessment system can be viewed holistically in terms of traditional education practices based on prescribed textbooks, while Australian assessment is based on a contemporary western philosophy of education which emphasizes measuring children's performance in a wide range of activities to give the teacher a broad basis to determine a child's individual level of performance. While both cultures achieve the aim of equipping their children with literacy, numeracy, and other basic skills necessary for a child's early development, the route to achieving these goals appears to vary considerably between the two countries on account of fundamental differences in the cultural perspectives and educational rationales employed in each country.

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