

# A comparative study of system-level policies to ensure educational quality in the United States and Japan<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This comparative study examines system-level policies to ensure quality of elementary and secondary education in the U.S. and Japan over the past decade. The conceptual framework of this study is based on Keith Nitta's comparative study of the U.S. and Japan—The Politics of Structural Education Reform (2008) – in which he contended that a few global trends led both countries to gradually adopt similar measures of structural education reform, such as curricular standards, student assessment, etc., despite contextual differences during the period from the 1980s to about 2007. In this context, our study focused on the latest reform measures that were not covered in Nitta's work, and found that the latest education reform in the two countries was also essentially structural, but that there were two distinctive differences in the details in terms of standards and tests, as well as accountability for results. The prevalence of multiple-choice-based state standardised tests and severe sanctions for results in the U.S. was contrasted to the adoption of the national courses of study and tests emphasizing basic knowledge and PISA-type application skills and lenient accountability for results in Japan. In the U.S., there was a sense of frustration over insufficient results from decades of education reform, which led to the adoption of a rigid accountability system for quality assurance, whereas in Japan, no severe sanctions are imposed on schools and teachers as educational quality is assured in reality through the national courses of study and a fierce entrance examination system in which de facto accountability is imposed on students.*

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**Key Words:** structural education reform; educational quality; globalisation; American education; Japanese education

## I. Introduction

This comparative study examines system-level policies to ensure quality of elementary and secondary education in the U.S. and Japan over the past decade. Because of global trends, both countries have implemented policies to improve the quality of education through various measures, such as curricular standards, student assessment, school evaluation, etc. The conceptual framework of this study is based on Keith Nitta's work, *The Politics of Structural Education Reform* (2008) -- a comparative study of the U.S. and Japan, in which he identified a few global trends that challenged public education and contended that such trends led both countries to gradually adopt similar measures of structural reform despite contextual differences. Nitta emphasised similarities in structural education reform and dealt with the period up to about 2007.

In this context, our study focuses on the latest education reform measures that are not covered in Nitta's work, while using his conceptual framework. This study closely examines a few key differences in addition to similarities in the latest structural reform measures to ensure educational quality in the

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two countries, in contrast to Nitta's work that was predominantly focused on the similarities of reform measures for an earlier period.

### Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

In this section, we will describe Keith Nitta's work more in detail to lay the foundation of the conceptual framework of our study. In his comparative study of education reform in the U.S. and Japan, Nitta (2008) identified the following "three global trends" that have affected the education policymaking environment especially since the 1980s (p.2):

1. Widespread belief that failing schools threatened economic competitiveness;
2. Widespread acceptance of New Public Management; and
3. Weakening and divided education interest groups, particularly teachers' unions.

Nitta argued that these three global trends challenged public education and led to the adoption of similar measures of structural education reform in the U.S. and Japan despite the contextual differences.

The first global trend is the widespread belief about failing schools. On this issue, Nitta stressed the similarities of the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 in the U.S. and the formation of the Ad Hoc Council on Education in 1984 in Japan. He stated that both spread the sense of crisis due to a decline in academic achievement and led the governments and the public in the two countries to recognise the need for fundamental education reform in order to develop skilled workers and to remain competitive in the globalised world.

The second global trend is the widespread acceptance of New Public Management (NPM) as an effective reform measure. As a result of the first trend, both countries started implementing various education reform measures, and during the 1990s, the NPM became popular based on the idea of bringing private sector efficiency and accountability into the public sector, including education. On this matter, Nitta (2008) stated as follows:

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The structural education reform agenda in both the United States and Japan drew heavily from the New Public Management (NPM). As opposed to traditional education reforms, structural education reforms explicitly avoided addressing curriculum, instructional strategy, or educational resources. Instead, the NPM promised to improve education by focusing on performance rather than "input," such as money, facilities, the number of teachers per student, or teacher quality. Rather than worrying about these issues, structural reforms promised to improve student learning by simply redistributing authority in a "loose-tight" arrangement (pp. 2-3).

Thus, the structural education reform measures were implemented in both countries, often using the schemes of the NPM and moving away from the traditional measures focused on various forms of inputs.

The third global trend is weakening and divided education interest groups, particularly teachers' unions. On this matter, Nitta (2008) stated as follows:

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, U.S. and Japanese teachers' unions began to fracture because of disagreements over the best response to persistent educational problems and flagging membership. Fragmentation among unions led to political instability in the education sector. Traditional coalitions based on political party, ideology, and even shared sectoral interests broke down. These divisions made the education sector vulnerable to outside intervention, and previously immobilised reforms were suddenly enacted (p.7).

Due to the weakening and divided education interest groups, especially teachers' unions, the traditional decision-making processes broke down, and structural reforms started taking hold in the education

sector. These three global trends, thus, led the two countries to adopt structural education reforms despite their contextual differences.

There are two important points in Nitta's work that need to be emphasised in the development of the conceptual framework for this study. First, Nitta stressed the importance of similarities of moderate, structural education reform in the two countries. He emphasised that the education reform measures in the two countries were not only *structural* in that they dealt with curricular standards, standardised tests, etc., but also *moderate* in that radical measures, such as privatisation and tuition vouchers were not the major part of the reform in the two countries. As for what he meant by moderate structural education reform, Nitta stated:

Specific examples of moderate structural education reform include curricular standards, standardised tests, school evaluation systems, teacher evaluation systems, standardised accountability interventions, budgetary consolidation...school site management, and charter schools (pp. 12-13).

Second, Nitta examined the similarities of the structural education reform measures in the U.S. and Japan for the period up to about 2007 by meticulously comparing the reform measures in the two countries. For example, he pointed out the similarities of structural education reform measures, such as the Goals 2000 and the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994 in the U.S. and the Program for Education Reform in 1997. As we will see in the following section, this study uses Nitta's conceptual framework and examines the two points mentioned above during the latest period that was not covered in his work.

In terms of existing literature on structural education reform in the U.S. and Japan, there are a number of single-nation studies on the U.S. and Japan over the past decade or so, although the number of comparative studies on education reform in the U.S. and Japan is limited to Nitta's work. As for education reform in the U.S., several publications are particularly superb in providing detailed information on general processes of advancing the standards-based reform movement, as well as legislative processes of developing IASA of 1994 and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 as representing the structural education reform movement in the U.S. (Jennings, 1998; DeBray, 2006; McGuinn, 2006; Vinovski, 2009; Manna, 2011). As for education reform in Japan, a few book chapters in publications on comparative education are especially excellent in providing the current context of education reform in Japan (Watanabe, 2010; Takayama, 2012). We made use of accumulated knowledge from these studies. However, there is no comparative study on structural education reform in the U.S. and Japan during the latest period after 2007. The significance of this comparative study, therefore, lies in the fact that it contributes to the body of knowledge by analysing the latest development of structural education reform in the two countries, using Nitta's conceptual framework.

## II. Research Questions and Methods

In this context, the authors of this study attempt to answer the following three research questions:

Does Nitta's conclusion (on the salience of moderate, structural education reform until 2007) still hold true for the latest period?

Are the structural education reform measures in the U.S. and Japan similar or different during the latest period, as in Nitta's study?

What are the factors behind the differences?

This study is based on the review and analysis of major official documents and related literature on education policies of the two countries, as well as the analysis of recently conducted interviews with policymakers and researchers in the U.S. In terms of U.S. education reform, we examined the official documents of the IASA and NCLB, as well as official documents of the Department of Education on the Race to the Top program, etc. In terms of Japanese education reform, we examined the official

documents of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) on the Courses of Study, the National Assessment of Academic Ability, the Basic Plan, etc. In addition, we examined related literature on education reform in the two countries, many of which are listed in the previous section.

### III. Findings

In this section, we will present the major findings of this study according to the three research questions presented above.

#### A. Prevalence of Moderate, Structural Education Reform

In terms of the first research question regarding the continuation of structural education reform, our answer is yes. We found that the latest education reform under the Obama administration in the U.S., as well as its counterpart in Japan, were also essentially structural based on curricular standards, standardised tests, etc., as Nitta suggested for an earlier period. In addition, we also found that the latest reform was moderate in nature in that reform measures were mostly related to standards and accountability and that extreme forms of education reform measures, such as privatisation and tuition vouchers, were not the major components of the reform, as Nitta suggested for an earlier period.

#### B. Differences in the Details of Structural Education Reform Measures

In terms of the second research question regarding the similarities of structural education reform in the two countries during the latest period, our answer is no. That is, although we found that the latest reform in the two countries was essentially structural in nature, there were at least two distinctive differences in the details of structural education reform measures. The first difference is about standards and tests, and the second difference is about accountability for results. We will examine the two sets of differences, followed by major factors behind those differences.

#### C. Differences in Standards and Tests

First, under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, which was enacted in January, 2002 in the U.S., each state was mandated to develop content and performance standards and standardised tests to go with them<sup>(2)</sup>. Under IASA, which was enacted in 1994 as the previous reauthorisation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, each state was to develop standardised tests for students in Grades 4, 8, and 10. At that time, states had developed a variety of assessment instruments, including innovative tests based on authentic assessment methods, etc. However, NCLB mandated annual tests for Grades 3 through 8 in reading and mathematics, so most states were forced to develop multiple-choice-based tests. Annual testing of Grades 3 through 8 mandated by NCLB, thus, resulted in limiting the type of tests used by states, as Richard Elmore stated, as follows:

NCLB sets fixed parameters on state accountability systems that previously did not exist in federal policy. These requirements dramatically reduce the range of variation among state policy that previously existed: Annual testing at fixed grade levels, for example, limits the type of tests that can be used—more ambitious, criterion-referenced tests are too expensive to administer and score for every student on an annual basis (2009, p.232).

Thus, in the U.S., multiple-choice-based tests ended up dominating the standardised state tests, as they are relatively cheaper to administer.

2 The NCLB Act was a six-year reauthorisation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and was hence supposed to be revised by 2008. However, due to the legislative inertia based on divided Congress, it has not been reauthorised as of May, 2013 (Under the Democratic President Obama, Republicans control the House, while Democrats control the Senate).

In addition, although NCLB mandated the development of content and performance standards and implementation of standardised tests, along with severe sanctions for not meeting the adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets, and “mandate[d] that all children be proficient in basic subjects by 2014, each state defines proficiency in its own unique way” (Fuller, et al., 2007, p.270). That is why there are fifty state standards and tests, and there are considerable variations among them. Bruce Fuller and his associates (2007) examined the differences between the results of state standardised tests and those of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), and stated that:

Performance in many states continues to apparently climb. But the bar defining proficiency is set much lower in most states, compared with the NAEP definition, and the disparity between state and federal results has grown since 2001 (p. 268).

In the U.S., then, the standards and tests emphasised in education reform are mostly multiple-choice exams at the state level based on the consideration of cost-efficiency and have considerable variations across states due to the local discretion granted to each state by NCLB.

In response to the criticisms on the considerable variations across states and lenient standards, the National Governors’ Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers sponsored an initiative to develop the Common Core State Standards in reading and mathematics, which are aligned, rigorous standards. As the U.S. emphasises the primacy of state governments in making decisions about education, this movement is considered to be a national effort rather than a federal one. As of May, 2013, as many as 45 states and the District of Columbia have agreed to adopt the standards, although it is a voluntary initiative and not mandated, but strongly tied to the Race to the Top program, started in 2009 under the Obama Administration. This is the latest development, and its impact on the results is yet to be seen.

By contrast, in Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports, and Technology (MEXT) has recently implemented the new Courses of Study (national curriculum) in order to improve the quality of education. In revising the Courses of Study, the MEXT emphasised the core principle of a “zest for life” (*ikiru chikara*), which is supported by three principles consisting of “solid academic prowess, to be rich in humanity, and health and fitness” (MEXT, 2011, p.4). Solid academic prowess is very important in that it is comprised of not only basic knowledge and ability but application skills as well<sup>(3)</sup>. The MEXT thus promotes the skills to apply knowledge that the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) emphasises<sup>(4)</sup>. As it is well-known, PISA tests emphasise skills to utilise knowledge in real-life situations, rather than just the mastery of knowledge about facts and figures.

In addition, since 2007, the MEXT has conducted the annual National Assessment of Academic Ability for students in Grades 6 and 9 for Japanese and mathematics in order to evaluate not only the level of basic knowledge, but also PISA-type application skills. In fact, there are two sections in the National Assessment of Academic Ability, and the first part emphasises basic knowledge and skills, while the second part focuses on application skills.

Thus, when we compare the education reform in the two countries in recent years, we see some differences in terms of standards and tests. In the U.S., varied state content and performance standards along with multiple-choice-based state tests dominate, although there have been efforts to develop the Common Core State Standards to establish higher-level standards on a national basis. By contrast, Japan has implemented a new national curriculum and tests to upgrade quality of elementary and secondary education by emphasizing not only basic knowledge and skills but also PISA-type application skills. In other words, in terms of the curricular standards, the U.S. has content and performance standards at

3 The MEXT defined solid academic prowess as “to acquire the basics and fundamentals; to cultivate introspection, the desire to learn and think, independent decision-making and action, as well as the talent and ability for problem-solving” (MEXT, 2011, p.4).

4 The new Courses of Study (national curriculum) have been implemented at the different levels of schools in different years. They were implemented at the elementary school level (Grades 1-6) in April, 2011, at the junior high school level (Grades 7-9) in April 2012, and at the high school level (Grades 10-12) in April 2013.

the state level, while Japan has only content standards at the national level. In terms of the tests, the most important tests are standards-based exams in the U.S., whereas they are entrance examinations for high schools and universities in Japan, as discussed further later.

#### D. Differences in Accountability for Results

Second, under NCLB in the U.S., schools have been held accountable for results by student test scores with various sanctions. NCLB mandated each state to set annual goals, called the adequate yearly progress (AYP), that defined the proportion of students needed to score at proficient levels or better in reading and mathematics, so that all the students will be proficient by 2014. To avoid sanctions, each school or district must meet AYP for all subgroups by race, income, disability status, English language learner status, etc. If schools fail to meet AYP for two consecutive years, they are identified as schools in need of improvement and must allow their students to transfer to other schools. There is a cascading system of sanctions uniformly set by the law, and if they fail to meet AYP for three or more consecutive years (up to six consecutive years), the consequences become more severe for schools that continue to miss AYP<sup>5</sup>. NCLB's consequences for missing AYP, however, apply only to schools and districts receiving funding through Title I of NCLB.

Under the Race to the Top (RTTT) programs introduced in 2009, accountability for results came down to teachers, as there have been attempts to tie student test scores with teacher evaluation. RTTT is a competitive grant program designed to encourage states to innovate and advance reforms in four core areas: 1) "Adopting standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace and to compete in the global economy"; 2) "Building data systems that measure student growth and success, and inform teachers and principals about how they can improve instruction"; 3) "Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals, especially where they are needed most"; and 4) "Turning around our lowest-achieving schools"(USDE 2009, pp. 2-3). In addition, selection criteria of the competition for RTTT grants among states include "Improving teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance"(ibid.), and under such purposes or conditions of RTTT, standardised tests results would be used for teacher evaluation (Candal, 2012).

In addition, in response to the mounting criticisms especially on the NCLB's most onerous provisions, such as bringing all the students to be proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014, the Obama administration offered to waive the law's major requirements to states that promise to follow the administration's school improvement plans, specified in RTTT in September 2011. Thirty-two states and the District of Columbia have been granted NCLB waiver as of May 2013. Due to the legislative inertia based on divided Congress, the Obama administration has been advancing its education reform agendas through the administrative branch.

By contrast, in Japan, although there has been a recent emphasis on national tests and school evaluation, there is no severe sanction imposed on teachers and schools. In December 2006, the Fundamental Law of Education was revised for the first time since its enactment in the post World War II reform period. Pursuant to the new provision of the revised Fundamental Law of Education, the national government established the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education in July 2008. The Basic Plan prescribes the measures to be implemented for the next five years, which include "Continuous implementing of the National Assessment of Academic Ability and providing assistance to schools for their improvements through the utilisation of the assessed results"(MEXT, 2008). The National Assessment of Academic

5 If a Title I school fails to make AYP for three consecutive years, it must be identified for a second year of school improvement. All the students in the school must be offered the opportunity to receive supplemental educational services (SES), in addition to the transfer option. If a school fails to make AYP for four consecutive years, it must be identified for corrective action. In addition to offering the transfer option and SES to the students, the school must implement one corrective action, such as replacing school staff relevant to the school not making AYP, implementing a new curriculum, limiting management authority at the school level, etc. If a school fails to make AYP for five or six consecutive years, it must be identified for restructuring. Restructuring of the school must involve implementation of some form of alternative governance structure, such as reopening the school as a charter school, replacing all or most of the school staff, contracting with an education management organisation to operate the school, etc (Skinner & Lomax 2011, pp. 11-13).

Ability has been carried out since 2007 in Japanese and mathematics for students in the 6th and 9th grades, as stated above. The Basic Plan emphasises the importance of the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Action) cycle as follows:

The government encourages all Boards of Education and schools to establish the PDCA cycle, which consists of the effective utilisation of its results for the improvement of their problems, and to ensure their accountability to parents and guardians (MEXT, 2008).

The Basic Plan’s measures for the next five years also include “Promoting school evaluations for improving school administration with the utilisation of evaluation results.” Through the revision of the Enforcement Regulation of the School Education Law in 2007, all schools were required to implement self-evaluation and announce its results. The national government set the School Evaluation Guideline for compulsory education in 2006, and revised it to include the high school education level in 2008. As one of the purposes of school evaluation, the Guideline prescribes ensuring the quality of education and raising it through the assistance of the Boards of Education according to the results of school evaluation. Despite these emphases on the national achievement tests and school evaluations, however, rigid accountability measures to teachers or schools have not been taken in Japan. The national tests scores are not directly tied with school evaluation or teacher evaluation.

Thus, when we compare the education reform in the two countries in recent years, we see some differences in terms of accountability for results as well. In the U.S., schools and districts have been held accountable by student test scores and other measures with severe sanctions, and there have been attempts to tie student test scores with teacher evaluation. By contrast, despite an increasing emphasis placed on national achievement tests and school evaluations, no severe sanctions are imposed on schools and teachers.

Table 1 summarises the comparisons of differences in structural reform in the two countries in terms of standards and tests, as well as accountability for results, as presented above.

Table 1: Comparisons of Differences in Structural Reform in the Two Countries

| Items                          | The U.S.   | Japan  |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Standards and Tests            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– There are content and performance standards at the state level.</li> <li>– Annual testing in Grades 3-8 in reading and math resulted in multiple-choice based exams.</li> <li>– There is a considerable variation in standards across states.</li> <li>– The Common Core State Standards have been developed to upgrade standards which are aligned.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The new Courses of Study have been implemented to improve the quality of education.</li> <li>– The National Assessment of Academic Ability has been conducted since 2007 in Japanese and math, consisting of assessment of basic knowledge and PISA-type application skills.</li> </ul> |
| Accountability for the results | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– A cascading system of sanctions was imposed on schools and districts which do not make AYP under NCLB.</li> <li>– There have been attempts to link student test scores with teacher evaluation under RTTT.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– No severe sanctions are imposed on schools and teachers.</li> <li>– Entrance exams play a key role in quality assurance, and <i>de facto</i> accountability is imposed on students.</li> </ul>  |

## E. Major Factors behind the Differences in the Two Countries

In terms of the third research question, we will examine major factors behind the differences in standards, tests, and accountability for results in the two countries. In the U.S., the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 stirred fierce debates about how to improve education standards and led states to implement various education reforms to upgrade student academic achievement. The Education Summit in September in 1989 became a turning point as President George W.H. Bush and the nation's governors gathered to agree on the development and implementation of national goals, as well as of standards and tests. Since the 1990s, many attempts were made to narrow achievement gaps based on income, race, etc., and a considerable amount of money was invested by the federal government, as well as by state and local governments, for that cause, but the results, especially in terms of test scores, were still disappointing. This situation created a sense of frustration and urgency over time, which led to the demands that any education reforms should get results with rigid monitoring mechanisms at the time of enacting NCLB.

Also, we may point out the influences of the results-oriented administration reforms. For example, the ESEA shifted its major emphasis in governmental regulations from inputs to outcomes by the 1994 reauthorisation of ESEA (IASA). The Clinton Administration had launched large-scale results-oriented administration reform, and in 1993, the National Performance Review, a task force of the Administration, had issued its report *From Red Tape to Results*. Also, in the same year, the Government Performance and Results Act had been enacted. Accountability for results under IASA was not strictly reinforced, and NCLB as the next reauthorisation of ESEA in 2002 strengthened the accountability structures with severe sanctions to make sure that desired results will be attained.

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In Japan, the results-oriented administration reforms have been going on, too, and there have been emphases on the results in education reform measures. However, as stated above, there are no severe sanctions imposed on teachers and schools based on the results of the national tests. Among many factors behind this situation, it should be stressed that competition in entrance examinations has played a key role in ensuring educational quality, and that *de facto* accountability has been imposed on students and their families in Japan.

Japanese public education has emphasised the guarantee of equal and common opportunity of education, and its system has been expected to work as an effective tool for social mobility. In Japan, not only universities but also high schools, public as well as private, are quite selective. After regular school hours, many students use private tutoring institutions called *juku* or *yobiko* to prepare for entrance examinations. Also, there are many students who spend one or more years at such institutions to prepare for university entrance examinations after graduating from high schools.

The pressure of entrance examinations has weakened to some extent particularly because of the decline of the birth rate. In fact, the number of 18-year-old students in 2010 is about 60 percent of that in 1992. There have been concerns over a perceived decline in academic achievements, especially based on the decline in the results of PISA 2003, which was announced in 2004, which triggered the adoption of national achievement tests and school evaluations. However, competitions for entrance examinations especially at prestigious high schools and universities are still stiff, and private tutoring institutions still play important roles for entrance examinations. In addition, there are many private tutoring institutions which aim to assist students to learn basic knowledge and skills of major academic subjects.

Under such circumstances, we can point out that it is quite difficult to tie the scores of national tests directly to school or teacher evaluation and to impose punitive sanctions on schools or teachers. In addition, because of the highly competitive nature of Japan's school system, there are also strong fears or oppositions toward introducing further competitions among schools by using the national test scores. These are the major factors behind the absence of a punitive accountability system based on student test scores in Japan.



## IV. Conclusions and Implications of This Study

The latest education reform in the two countries is structural and moderate, as in Nitta's work on the earlier period. It is structural in that reform measures are related to standards and accountability, and it is moderate in that reform measures are not very much related to privatisation and school choice.

However, there are two distinctive differences in the details, namely that of curricular standards and standardised tests and that of accountability for results. Concerning standards in the U.S., each state is mandated to develop not only content but also performance standards to measure student progress, while, in Japan, the national Courses of Study consist only of content standards. In terms of tests, in the U.S., standardised tests are mostly multiple-choice-based, while, in Japan, national achievement tests incorporate both basic knowledge and skills and PISA-type application skills. Concerning accountability, in the U.S., schools and teachers have been held accountable for results by student test scores with various sanctions while, in Japan, there are no severe sanctions imposed on schools and teachers based on the results of the National Assessment of Academic Achievement. Instead, due to the competitive nature of Japan's school system, *de facto* accountability is imposed on each student.

Both countries have thus attempted to ensure educational quality through structural education reform measures, but there were differences in the details of the measures due to different socio-economic circumstances. In the U.S., the focus of the recent reform was to narrow achievement gaps especially by income and race, and content and performance standards along with standardised tests had to be developed to check the progress, because decades of reform had not produced sufficient results. But, strong tradition of local control prevailed, and each state was given the autonomy to develop standards and tests, although punitive sanctions were imposed uniformly from the top down. This study ends in the middle of a movement for most states to adopt and implement the Common Core State Standards, motivated by the RTTT program under the Obama Administration, but the impact of the movement is yet to be seen.

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In Japan, the focus of the recent reform was to upgrade education quality in response to the disclosure of the lack of PISA-type application skills among 15-year-old students in the country. Accordingly, the MEXT implemented the new Courses of Study and the National Assessment of Academic Ability at the national level. As pointed out above, the competitive schooling system in Japan has ensured educational quality without punitive measures on schools and teachers, while *de facto* accountability was imposed on students. But, the income disparity has widened over the past decade, leading also to the widening of achievement gaps in the country, and there may be some debate about holding schools and teachers accountable by student test scores for quality assurance in the future<sup>(6)</sup>.

Further studies are needed on similarities and differences in structural education reform in the two countries, as well as various factors behind them under President Obama's 2<sup>nd</sup> term and Prime Minister Abe's new administration.

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