



A Comparative Study of Preschool Education System in England, Germany, Iran, Italy and Japan

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 23 June 2025 Revised: 04 October 2025 Accepted: 21 April 2025 Online: 06 September 2026	The aim of study was to compare the preschool educational systems in selected countries. The research findings reveal that the preschool system in Iran – based on Islamic/Iranian identity and coherent national programs-, has achieved improved educational coverage, which is similar to Japan in terms of the national program, although the lack of budget has created some limitations. Japan emphasizes cultural identity by combining the strategy of tradition and innovation, but the pressure of financial costs of extracurricular activities is high. Germany operates with a federal structure, with high quality and cultural acceptance, although the heterogeneity of standards has created challenges. England organizes play-based learning and comprehensive development of the child and independent quality assessment. This country is also similar to Italy in terms of play-based. Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches are centered on creativity and collective participation in the Italian preschools; however, the pressure of standardization and the lack of infrastructure in some regions of this country are a serious threat. Also, the main similarity among selected countries is in their emphasis on the all-round development of children and importance of pre-primary education. According to the findings, Iranian educational planners are recommended to develop and implement coherent policies, revive integrated management, increase government financial support & investment, and approve national standards to improve the quality and quantity of preschool education.
KEYWORDS	
Creativity Cultural Identity Play-based Learning Preschool Education	

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1. Introduction

Childhood is considered the most crucial period of human life; a period when a child first connects with the world, lays the foundations of social relationships, and gains a relative understanding of her/his identity. In the meantime, preschool education plays a pivotal role in nurturing the social and emotional dimensions of children. The unique role of this period in shaping lifelong learning is not hidden from anyone, as it provides a safe and dynamic space for strengthening communicative, behavioral, and cognitive abilities (Barnett, 2013). Indeed, education during these critical years has a profound impact on later academic success and social interaction. This has made “Early Childhood Education” a vital area in educational systems. Families seek to strengthen their children’s skills to be more prepared for school entry, and the quality of the learning environment in the early years has an undeniable impact on the child’s development (Koomen and Zaneti, 2018). In addition to having a significant impact on cognitive, social, and emotional development, Preschool Education (PE) plays a vital role in shaping a child’s future academic success and overall well-being (Bansod, 2025). PE also fosters social skills and emotional regulation that are critical for children’s interactions with peers and adults. The process of “socialization” - that occurs in preschool settings - increases children’s ability to learn in groups, work in teams, and manages their conflicts (Ansari, 2018).

In terms of developing a child's sensory-motor abilities, education during this period often includes activities that increase physical coordination and motor skills. Structured physical activities - such as practicing walking in a square space - have been shown to improve both motor and cognitive skills. In general, the integration of cognitive, emotional and sensory-motor learning in preschool environments is essential for the holistic development of a child's personality, preparing them to face the challenges of formal education and life (Domínguez-Muñoz, et al, 2021). International evidence - including reports from reputable organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF - proves that investing in PE not only improves children's developmental indicators, but also has significant economic and social returns for society. Access to quality preschool education can reduce the gaps caused by economic and social inequalities and pave the way for achieving educational justice (UNESCO, 2019).

Despite the importance of PE, countries around the world - especially third world - face numerous challenges. For example, Brooks et al. (2025) designing a curriculum assessment tool for preschool in Africa showed that preparing an assessment tool tailored to each country's curriculum plays an effective role of PE. Based on data obtained in Africa, Frola (2024) concludes that challenges such as lack of infrastructure, spatial inequality and cultural barriers have caused the

enrollment rate of children in PE to be much lower in rural areas than in urban centers. According to Yan (2024), the lack of growth assessment tools and appropriate preschool curricula is another challenge for third world countries. In fact, tools designed for Western cultures are ineffective in accurately identifying the needs of non-Western children. Artipah et al.(2024), in their study of preschool in Pakistan, identified the country's major challenges of PE are lack of funding, administrative differences between provinces, and cultural barriers to accepting early education.

In her review of contemporary obstacles to the PE system in Russia, Ulzytueva (2024) points to challenges such as identifying new anatomical, physiological, psychological & educational characteristics of new learners, searching for new strategies to improve the quality of education, digitizing PE, developing the prerequisites for applied literacy in the educational process, facilitating the transition from preschool to primary school, organizing work with young children and interacting with parents. UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report (2022) on Challenges and Early Childhood Care and Education has examined the state of early childhood education and care in the world with a comparative approach. Findings emphasize challenges in government investment, lack of qualified teacher training, and failure to meet quality standards in the process of preschool centers' success. Olczyk et al. (2021) examined the challenges of preschool in six high-income countries and concluded that the role of income, family structure, and socioeconomic gaps in access to preschool or private education varies from country to country. In the United States, income inequalities and access to preschool education play a more important role in creating gaps, while in Germany and the Netherlands, differences in school quality are more important factors. Research by Mondt et al. (2021) on the impact of preschool intervention and education on children in different states of the United States, it was suggested that the aforementioned interventions play a vital role in strengthening children's emotional & social learning. UNICEF (2019) report emphasizes that investing in quality preschool education is essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and is a major challenge in developing countries. Sheridan (2019) points to preschool in the United States and challenges such as persistent deficits in cognitive & social skills, lack of targeted interventions for children with special needs and unstable financial situations. Ansari (2018) compared adolescents who completed PE with those who did not and showed that the former group performed better on exams of academic achievement and social skills, which is why preschool education is emphasized in the United States. UNESCO's Global Monitoring Report on Education for All (2015) indicates that developing and improving comprehensive Early Childhood Education and Care has been raised as one of the key goals of "Education for All". During the period 2000-2015, countries have experienced numerous progress and challenges on the path to achieving

this goal. By providing extensive information on the status of PE in different regions of the world, this report has provided a platform for comparing the status of countries and identifying their obstacles and strengths. Wagner et al. (2014) compared PE policies and practices in Finland, Japan, the United States, China and Australia. The findings emphasized the fundamental role of government policy-making in the quality and development of PE. Also, attention to educational equity and access for all children was one of the factors of success in these countries. Akar (2010), in his research about PE in Turkey, identified the presence of immigrant children from different parts of the world in classrooms - with different languages and cultural backgrounds -, bilingual or multilingual education, and social integration as challenges in implementing preschool education for this country.

Various studies have been conducted on the Iran preschool education system. For example, Khaleghi-Nejad and Pirzad (2023) and Pasandideh and Sabzeh (2022) point out four major obstacles to the development of PE, considering the analysis of the policy of educational coverage of preschoolers in multi-grade classes, especially in rural and bilingual areas. These obstacles include: Low social capital of informal teachers, weak motivation of multi-grade teachers to work with preschool children, poor management of preschool education, and an environment lacking appropriate facilities and equipment. Shahi Jame-Bozorgy, Nabi & Ojinejad (2021) compared preschool period in Iran, Germany, France, and Malaysia and concluded that the most important problem in Iran is the lack of a national trustee for preschool education and lack of integrated management. Irannejad and Tehrani (2021) compared preschool education in Iran and South Korea and listed the challenges of PE in Iran as the lack of acceptable laws & regulations for educators, lack of training and low educational qualifications, use of retired teachers, shortage of educators, shortage of educational space, and incompatibility of the environment & facilities with the age of the child. Armand and Ghasemi-Rad (2013) reviewed the structure and challenges of the Iran preschool education system, compared it with other countries, and raised the deep gap in quality and equity in the Iranian preschool education system compared to international standards and successful global models. This gap manifests itself in the form of several issues such as the parallel work of responsible institutions such as the Welfare Organization of Iran and the Ministry of Education. Razaghian et al. (2010) revealed that one of the problems of PE in Iran is lack of sufficient knowledge and skills of teachers about children. Akash (2017) considers the most important disadvantages of PE to be weakness in macro-management, use of unskilled workers, low salaries of teachers, and lack of cooperation of parents and families. On the other hand, Khani (2015) after evaluating the PE curriculum pointed out problems such as low quality of these

programs and content. Razavi and Gorji (2015) also consider one of the vulnerable points in PE in Iran is lack of attention to the realization of the goals of cognitive and emotional domains. Abbasi and Pourshirazi (2014) emphasize the need to address problems such as limited facilities, financial weakness, insufficient attention to PE centers in deprived areas, and lack of determining the necessary legal standards. The findings of Pushneh and Khosravi (2012) and Fattahi (2012) consider the low quality of teachers' skills, lack of relevant university degrees, teachers' lack of motivation, and lack of appropriate investment as important challenges for PE. Govhar Nik (2011) confirms this issue and introduces reforming the management structure of the PE system as one of the factors for overcoming crisis. Considering the previous research findings, this study sought to compare the PE systems in Iran, Japan, England, Germany, and Italy based on countries selection strategy (different social systems, different educational outcomes). The questions of research were:

- What are similarities between goals, structure, content, challenges, and policies of PE in the selected countries?
- What are differences between goals, structure, content, challenges, and policies of PE in the selected countries?

2. Research Method

The research method was qualitative comparative and the target population included the pre-primary education period in five countries of Iran, Japan, England, Germany, and Italy. The strategy of “different social systems, different educational outputs” was used to select the countries. The data collection method was documentary, through reviewing authentic printed and electronic documents - national and international - by searching in information databases (Google Scholar , Science Direct) , official reports, international organizations (World Bank, OECD, UNESCO), and the formal website of the Ministry of Education. The publication period was considered to be 2000 to 2024 for international sources and 2011 - 2025 for Iranian sources, and finally 54 reliable scientific sources were selected and analyzed after screening through purposeful sampling. The research tools were questionnaires, checklists, and data recording. To determine the validity of the data, an attempt was made to consider concepts and terms based on a specific and objective definition. Also, to determine the validity of the data, the researcher's self-assessment method (confirmation of raw data during data collection & analysis) and the opinions of comparative studies experts were used (Kian, 2020). In order to analyze the data and draw comparative results, the four-stage Bereday's method - description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison - was used.

3. Findings

This section describes and interprets the PE – in terms of structure, goals, policies, content, and challenges - in Japan, Germany, England, Italy and Iran. Also, the similarities and differences of key indicators of preschool education in the selected countries were determined.

A. Description and Interpretation

In this stage, educational phenomena were systematically described based on evidence and data extracted from multiple sources, including document analysis, reports, and authoritative scientific texts. The process requires accurate recording of observations, comprehensive note-taking, and selection of a rich database to provide analytical data in the interpretation stage (Sadr & Kian, 2022).

Structure, goals, policies, content, and challenges of the preschool education system

1. Japan

The historical roots of preschool education in Japan date back to the late 19th century, when the first kindergarten was established in 1876. However, the structured development of PE was put on the government's agenda after World War II and the adoption of the new constitution in 1947. Collective norms such as discipline, respect, and teamwork have become fundamental pillars of PE (UNESCO, 2021).

Structure of the preschool education system

Children between the ages of 3 and 6 are allowed to enroll in PE centers. These centers are mainly organized into two formats: “kindergartens” and “preschools.” Educational programs are designed based on learning through play, social interactions, and collaborative activities and administered under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology, as well as in partnership with the private sector (MEXT, 2023: 2).

Macro-policies and responsible institutions

Japan’s PE system combines tradition and modernity, focusing on fostering individual independence and supporting working families. These policies are implemented in a semi-centralized structure and through collaboration between public and private institutions. The MEXT is responsible for supervising educational centers for children aged 3 to 6 and setting educational

standards – based on play and group activities. The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare is also responsible for managing “day care centers for children aged 0 to 6” with the aim of supporting working parents. In addition, local governments play a key role in allocating funds and monitoring the quality of preschool centers (OECD, 2025: 9).

Educational Goals

- Fostering independence and self-help in everyday life.
- Respect for nature and local culture.
- Teaching social skills and group ethics.
- Strengthening academic readiness.
- Developing physical activity and motor coordination (Peak, 2023).

Educational content

- Educational framework based on the Course of Study for Kindergarten
- Key areas: Health, communication, environment, language, expression and human relations.
- Combining real-world experiences with creative play; focusing on developing independence, cooperation and respect for others
- Interdisciplinary content (acquaintance with nature, music, art), (Ishimine, 2021).

Challenges

- Human resource shortage: Unbalanced teacher-to-child ratio (1:30)
- Resistance to change: Adherence to educational traditions as a major obstacle to the implementation of new educational methods
- Extracurricular costs: Significant monthly expenses by families for extracurricular classes (OECD, 2019a: 62).

2. Germany

Preschool education in Germany began with the establishment of the first “Kindergarten” by Friedrich Fröbel in 1837 - as a platform for fostering creativity, social skills, and learning through play-. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the process of industrialization and social changes led to the expansion of charitable, church, and civic kindergartens. After the reunification of West

and East Germany in 1990, national policies shaped the unified German preschool system with a focus on equal opportunities, multiculturalism, and quality assurance (Tan et,al, 2021).

Structure of the Preschool Education System

Children between the ages of 3 and 6 can enroll in preschool education centers. These centers operate mainly under the name "kita" (integrated education & care centers). The educational programs of PE are designed based on practical and social learning, and play & group interactions. These centers are supervised by local and state institutions (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2022: 24).

Macro-policies and responsible institutions

The macro-policies of PE in Germany are based on the principles of social justice, cultural integration and play-based learning. These policies are implemented within the framework of a federal and decentralized system that grants each state extensive power in the design and implementation of educational programs. The distribution of implementation responsibilities is as follows:

- Each state (such as Bavaria, Berlin and Hessen) has its own laws in the field of PE.
- The conference of state education ministers is responsible for macro-coordination.
- The Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women & Youth is responsible for macro-policy development, and financing & monitoring the implementation of the laws.
- Local governments are responsible for operational management of centers and ensuring access to services (OECD, 2020).

Educational Goals

- Developing language and communication skills.
- Fostering autonomy and decision-making.
- Reducing educational-social inequalities.
- Integrating science and mathematics into everyday learning.
- Promoting artistic and cultural creativity (Resa, 2020).

Educational content

- The Bildungsplan framework of each state with common concepts: Language and literacy, elementary mathematics, natural sciences, art and music, socio-emotional development.
- Project-based learning, free play and outdoor activities.

- Special emphasis on cultural diversity and multilingual education in immigrant-receiving areas (Fthenakis, 2022).

Challenges

- Differences in educational standards between different states.
- Severe shortage of specialized human resources and educators.
- Presence of non-German-speaking children in Berlin who require special educational programs.
- Cultural identity conflicts faced by immigrant children.
- Allocation of a large share of the budget of small municipalities to preschools (Tietze, 2021)

3. England

The history of PE in England dates back to the establishment of the first Froebel-style nursery school in 1851. In the early stages, the development of these centres relied mainly on the support of charities and the private sector. The passing of the Education Act in 1944, and in particular the development of the “Early Years Foundation Stage” (EYFS) framework in 2008, strengthened the role of government in ensuring the quality and support of children aged 0 to 5. The expansion of free childcare hours and adoption of supportive legislation provided the necessary basis for the inclusive participation of children in PE (Department for Education, 2023).

Structure of the Pre-Primary Education System

The age of entry to PE in England is set at 3 to 5 years. Institutions operating in this field include nurseries, pre-primary classes and private & public educational centers. The curriculum of PE is designed based on the EYFS framework, which emphasizes learning through play, development of social skills and emotional growth. Monitoring the quality of education in these centers is carried out under the responsibility of the Department for Education (Department for Education, 2023).

Macro-policies and responsible institutions

PE policies in England are designed based on the principles of educational equity, holistic child development and support for working families. These policies are implemented within the framework of a decentralized system. Institutions involved in the implementation of these policies include:

- Central government: Sets macro-policies through the Department for Education and develops the EYFS educational framework,
- Local governments: Monitors the quality of centers and allocates funds, and
- Independent organizations: The Office for Educational Standards (Ofsted) to evaluate and rank centers and provide specialized training for educators (OECD, 2022).

Educational Goals

- Fostering the holistic development of the child (physical, cognitive, social, emotional and linguistic),
- Creating a suitable environment for learning through play and curiosity, and
- Ensuring equality of opportunity for all children regardless of cultural, linguistic or economic background (Roberts, 2019).

Educational Content

- ❖ The main framework of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).
- ❖ Seven areas of learning: communication and language, physical development, personal and social development, literacy, mathematics, understanding the world, expressive arts.
- ❖ Attention to person-centered learning and designing content accordingly (Roberts, 2019).

Challenges

- Gradual reduction in per-child funding
- Significant quality gaps between centres in deprived and affluent areas
- Teacher burnout due to high workload
- Language development lag of children from low-income families due to poor quality of educational centres (Early Years Alliance, 2023).

These challenges require urgent attention from policymakers and the allocation of more resources to ensure equal educational opportunities for all children.

4. Italy

This country has gained international fame for the emergence and development of the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches to preschool education in the 20th century. Maria Montessori founded the first “Children’s House” in 1907, based on the principles of independence

and design of an enriched environment for children. Subsequently, the Reggio Emilia approach was developed in the aftermath of World War II, which emphasizes the active participation of families and communities and the recognition of the “Hundred Languages of Children.” The challenges facing the Italian education system are mainly focused on the integration of the private and public sectors and sustainable financing (Lillard, 2021).

Structure of the Preschool Education System

The age of entry into preschool in Italy is set from 3 to 6 years. Institutions active in PE include "*Acili Nido*" (nest kindergarten) and "*Scuola delle Infanzia*" (preschool schools). The educational programs of this period emphasize play-based education and development of creativity, and its most important element is dynamic interaction of children with each other and educational environment. Monitoring the educational quality of these centers is carried out under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Local Authorities (Andreella, et al, 2024).

Macro-policies and responsible institutions

Preschool education policies in Italy are designed based on the principles of creativity-centeredness, family participation and social justice. These policies are implemented within the framework of a semi-centralized system that grants different regions the powers to adapt national programs to local needs. The responsible institutions in this area include:

- Ministry of Education: Develops the national educational framework and ensures the implementation of the compulsory education law for the 3-6 age group,
- Regional governments: Operationally manage preschool centers and adapt educational programs,
- Municipal councils: Monitor the quality of centers and facilitate collaboration with families (OECD, 2019b).

Educational Goals

- Multifaceted and linguistic creative expression.
- Participatory and conversational learning.
- Fostering active citizenship.
- Development of artistic skills through group projects.
- Development of physical and perceptual skills. (Melis, 2026)

Educational Content

- Preschool education is part of the “*Scuola dell’Infanzia*” system.
- Five Domain Content: Identity, autonomy, social skills, basic mathematical and language skills, scientific-sensory experiences.
- Play-based approach and group learning inspired by the “*Reggio Emilia approach*” (Mantovani, 2020).

Challenges

- Inequality in educational coverage rates between deprived and affluent regions,
- Lack of educational infrastructure, such that schools in southern Italy lack standard play spaces,
- Decreased attention to creativity-oriented learning due to increasing pressure for standardization and uniform testing, and
- Gradual weakening of the Reggio Emilia philosophy under the influence of the requirements of a centralized educational system (Lillard, 2021).

These challenges require the adoption of comprehensive strategies and allocation of adequate financial resources to maintain the quality and authenticity of Italian preschool education system.

Iran

Preschool education in Iran began in the late Qajar period and early Pahlavi dynasty with the establishment of Western-style "kindergartens" inspired by the theories of Froebel and Montessori. These centers were initially limited to wealthy families and urban centers. In the 1960s, with the start of educational reforms and government support, kindergartens and preschools expanded, with institutions such as the "Iran Women Organization" playing a key role in this process. After the 1979 revolution, the focus was on Islamic education, strengthening national identity, and relative integration of kindergartens into the education structure. Since the 1990s, PE - especially for bilingual and nomadic regions - has been the focus of policymakers and become mandatory in some provinces. During the 1990 to 2011, a quality-oriented approach, teaching basic competencies, and developing social & language skills to prepare children for primary school were on the government's agenda. Currently, the Supreme Council of Education, the National Organization for Child Education, and other decision-making institutions play a pivotal role in policymaking, planning, and monitoring the quality of PE and the expansion of educational justice (Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2022).

Structure of the Preschool Education System

- Entry Age: Preschool education includes children aged 4 to 6,
- Type of Institutions: Kindergartens and preschools operating under the supervision of the Ministry of Education,
- Curriculum: Emphasis on play-based activities, social and emotional development of children, and preparation for entering primary school,
- Supervision: Supervision of institutions has been the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and the Children National Education Organization since 2022 (Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2022).

Macro-Policies and Responsible Institutions

Macro-policies of PE in Iran are designed based on strengthening Islamic-Iranian identity, educational justice, and preparing children to enter formal education system. These policies are influenced by higher-level documents, structural challenges, and socio-cultural priorities of the country. Also, the responsible institution in the field of PE is the Ministry of Education, which is primarily responsible for planning and supervising preschool centers (4-6 years) and developing the “Preschool Curriculum Document” - with an emphasis on basic skills and religious values-. Since 2020, supervision of kindergartens for children less than 3 years of age and private centers has also been entrusted to the Ministry of Education. Other responsible institutions in the PE include the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, which is responsible for approving macro-policies such as emphasizing the “role of the family in Islamic education” (Aghazadeh, 2020).

Educational Goals

- Improve cognitive skills through play-based activities.
- Strengthen social interaction and collaboration skills.
- Develop preschool literacy and basic language skills.
- Cultivate national-religious identity and moral values.
- Improve fine and gross motor skills (Pourzandi, 2022).

Educational Content

- Emphasis on comprehensive development (physical, cognitive, emotional, social).
- Program content includes more educational games, poetry and storytelling, basic science and math concepts, motor and social skills, familiarity with culture and life values.
- Attention to informal education in the form of games and group interaction (Roointan, 2022).

Challenges

- ❖ Access gap between urban and rural areas, with coverage rates of 30 percent in rural areas and 60 percent in urban areas (Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2022).
- ❖ Shortage of skilled workers, with only 40 percent of teachers having relevant university degrees.
- ❖ Gender norms that limit girls' attendance at preschools in some areas with traditional cultures.
- ❖ Parental expectations for early literacy education, inconsistent with the goals of inclusive growth (Ranjbar, 2012).
- ❖ Insufficient funding, with 0.05 percent of GDP allocated to preschool education.
- ❖ Unregulated privatization has led to the creation of centers with high tuition fees and reduced access to preschool education for low-income families.

The destructive effects of the managerial duality between the Ministry of Education and the Welfare Organization of Iran in recent years remain.

Table 1. Strengths and weaknesses of the preschool education system of selected countries

Japan
○ Strengths: High educational coverage through very high enrollment (92%) for 3–5 year olds; emphasis on social skills through group activities, visual documentation of children's progress. ○ Weaknesses: Stress from parental pressure to achieve academic success, unbalanced child-teacher ratios; high costs of extracurricular activities (Peak, 2023).
Germany
• Strengths: 94% child coverage with emphasis on universal access; practical learning based on Froebel philosophy; 6-month project-based assessment; immigrant integration policies. • Weaknesses: Heterogeneity of state standards; teacher shortage; pressure from city budget shortage; immigrant identity challenges (Tan, 2021)
England
• Strengths: Provision of a written framework for learning; Free childcare hours; Independent monitoring; Digital documentation of academic progress. • Weaknesses: 17% reduction in funding per child; Quality gap in deprived areas; 68% teacher burnout; Inequality of access (Robert, 2019)
Italy
• Strengths: Application of Montessori and Reggio Emilia educational philosophy; self-assessment of children; free compulsory education; creative documentation. • Weaknesses: Lack of play spaces in the south part of country; pressure of standardized tests; lack of funding for integration (Melis, 2026).
Iran
• Strengths: Integration and establishment of the National Organization for Child Education; Growth of educational coverage at 70%; Non-competitive descriptive assessment; Emphasis on Iranian-Islamic identity. • Weaknesses: Urban-rural divide; 60% shortage of specialized educators; Lack of funding; Unregulated privatization; Conflicting educational goals (Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2022).

B: Juxtaposition and Comparison Stages

Juxtaposition Stage

In this stage, the results obtained from the description and interpretation stage are combined with the educational characteristics of selected countries.

Table (2). Juxtaposition of institutional structure, macro policies, entry age, financial policy, objectives and content of PE

Comparative dimension	Iran	Japan	England	Germany	Italy
Structure and responsible institutions	Ministry of Education, provincial and city education departments, private kindergartens	MEXT, local State, private institutions	Department for Education (DfE), Local Education Authorities (LEAs), private and state schools	Federal Ministry of Education, state ministries of education, church and private institutions	Ministry of National Education, Regional Education Offices, Municipalities, Private Institutions
Educational goals and philosophy	educating a faithful, committed, creative and responsible person; Developing an Islamic-Iranian personality; Preparing for education	Cultivating a balanced personality, respect for society, self-sufficiency, creativity, and collective cooperation	Learning through play, developing social skills, school readiness, self-confidence	Developing the child's personality, autonomy, responsibility, social skills	Harmonious child development, creativity, artistic expression, respect for cultural diversity
Entry age and duration	3-6 years, year-long period, optional but expanding	Kindergarten (3-6) and Preschool (5-6), optional	3-5 years, mandatory from the age of 4.	3-6 years, optional but popular	3-6 years, optional
Financial policy	Public (free in the public sector), private (tuition fee), charitable donations	Local-government, private sector tuition, government subsidies for low-income	Government funding (15 free hours), financial assistance for needy families	State-fed, free in most states, parental involvement in some cases	State-local funding, free in the public sector, tuition in the private sector

		families			
Content	Educational games, basic concepts, teaching culture and values	Course of Study Areas: Health, Language, Expression, Environment	EYFS with seven areas of learning and continuous assessment	Bildungsplan, project-based learning, open space, multilingual	Scuola dell'Infanzia, play-based approach, Reggio/Montessori

Table (3). Juxtaposition of challenges in the PE in selected countries

Country/ challenges	Management and structural challenges	Qualitative and educational challenges	Economic and access challenges	Social and cultural challenges
Iran	Management duality The destructive effects of overlapping duties between the Ministry of Education and the Welfare Organization remain Geographical gap Rural areas: 30% Urban areas: 60%	Shortage of specialists Only 40% of educators have relevant university degrees Conflicting goals Parental expectations for early literacy instruction conflict with holistic development goals	Insufficient funding 0.05% of GDP allocated to pre-primary education Unregulated privatization Creating centers with high tuition fees and reducing access for low-income families	Gender Norms Restrictions on Girls' Attendance at Preschools in Some Traditional Areas
Japan	Human resource shortage Child to teacher ratio: 1 to 30 Traditionalism Resistance to changing traditional teaching methods despite global advances	Lack of specialized programs Educational programs less responsive to the needs of immigrant children Early stress High parental expectations lead to chronic stress in children aged 3-6	High additional costs Families pay up to \$500 per month for extracurricular classes	Social Pressure High parental expectations for early academic success
England	Burnout Coach burnout due to high workload	Differences in the quality of regions The quality of centers in deprived areas is much lower than in other areas. Language lag. Children from low-income families lag behind in terms of language	Budget cuts Reduction in budget allocated per child	Social Inequality The stark difference in the quality of education between different social classes

		development.		
Germany	Lack of integration Different educational standards between states A severe shortage of teachers and skilled labor	Language Challenges Some preschool children in Berlin are non-German speakers and require special programs	Lack of budget A large portion of the budget of small municipalities is spent on preschool centers.	Cultural Identity Conflict Immigrant children often experience conflict in their cultural identity.
Italy	Lack of infrastructure Schools in southern Italy lack standard playgrounds	Declining Creativity Pressure to Standardize Tests Undermines Reggio Emilia Philosophy	Regional Inequality Differences in Pre-Primary Education Coverage Rates in Deprived Areas	Regional Economic Challenges Difference in Access Between the North and South of the Country

Table (4). Examining the strengths and weaknesses of the preschool education system in selected countries

Iran		Italy		England		Germany		Japan	
strengths	weaknesses	strengths	weaknesses	strengths	weaknesses	strengths	weaknesses	strengths	weaknesses
Integration and establishment of the National Children's Organization. -Increase in educational coverage to 70%. -Non-competitive descriptive assessment. -Emphasis on Iranian-Islamic identity.	-Urban-rural gap. -60% shortage of specialized teachers. -Budget shortage. -Unregulated privatization. -Conflict of educational goals.	Montessori and Reggio Emilia philosophy. - Children's self-assessment. - Free compulsory education. - Creative documentary	-Lack of play spaces in the South. -Pressure of standardized tests. -Lack of integration funding.	- Documented framework in the learning area. - Free hours of care. - Independent supervision. Digital documentation of academic progress	-17% reduction in budget per child. -Quality gap in deprived areas. -68% burnout among teachers. -Inequality of access (Teachers Union,	-94% coverage with emphasis on universal access. -Practical learning based on the Faraday philosophy. -6-month project-based evaluation. -Immigrant integration policies.	Inconsistent state standards. -Trainer shortage. -City budget pressure. -Identity challenges of immigrants in Berlin.	- Very high enrollment coverage (92%) for children ages 3-5. - Emphasis on social skills through group activities. Visual documentation of children's progress	-Stress from parental pressure to succeed academically. -Child-to-teacher ratio. - Extracurricular costs. -Weaknesses in immigrant integration programs

Comparison Stage

In this stage, the research problem was carefully examined and compared in detail based on similarities and differences.

Table (5) Comparison of institutional structure, policies, educational goals, and educational content of preschool in selected societies

Dimension/Criteria	Description/Component	Iran	Japan	England	Germany	Italy
Structure and responsible institutions	Plurality/Integration of the Decision-Making Institution	*	*	*	*	
	Macro Policies and Upstream Documents		*	*	*	
	Institutional Monitoring and Evaluation System		*	*	*	
Support policy	Educational Coverage Rate		*	*	*	*
	Justice and Access to Disadvantaged/Marginalized Areas	*	*		*	
	Gender Coverage	*	*	*	*	*
Educational objectives	Strengthening social skills	*	*	*	*	*
	Strengthening motor skills		*	*		*
	Strengthening creativity	*		*	*	*
	Academic readiness	*	*		*	
	Strengthening perception		*	*	*	*
	Strengthening group skills	*	*			*
	Strengthening national identity					
Financial policy	Amount of government and public budget contribution	*	*	*	*	
	Private sector and family participation		*	*	*	*
	Support for vulnerable groups		*	*	*	
Educational content	Self-knowledge	*	*	*		
	Basic sciences (mathematics, etc.)			*	*	
	Verbal reinforcement	*	*	*	*	*
	Sensory motor reinforcement	*	*	*	*	*
	Teamwork reinforcement	*	*			*
	Life values reinforcement	×	*		*	
	Connection with the environment		*	*		*
	Interdisciplinary content		*		*	

Analysis and comparison of findings

This section compares PE in Iran, Japan, England, Germany and Italy, and the comparison is presented in different dimensions.

- Similarities and differences in structure and quality standards:

All selected countries consider PE as a formal part of the national education system and administer it under the supervision of government or semi-government institutions. For example, in Japan, the Ministry of Education sets standards and private centers are required to comply with

them. In Germany, state standards are established with national coordination and quality assurance through the Conference of Ministers of Education. In England, a national framework is implemented in all private and public centers. In Italy, a national framework is implemented with the possibility of regional adaptation and quality assessment of all centers, and in Iran, a national organization for children education and development was established and a preschool curriculum is developed. Countries such as England and Japan (National Curriculum Guide) and Germany and Italy (despite the diversity and application of approaches such as Froebel, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia) have specific curriculum frameworks and quality standards for monitoring PE. These frameworks help educators design and implement educational programs tailored to the developmental needs of children and also ensure that minimum quality standards are met. In Iran, despite efforts to develop educational standards, monitoring their implementation and ensuring quality in all centers - especially private centers - faces challenges. The lack of a unified and standardized curriculum framework for all centers (including kindergartens supervised by the Iran Welfare Organization and preschool centers affiliated with the Ministry of Education) can lead to inconsistencies in the content and quality of education.

-Similarities and differences in policies:

Japan, England, Germany and Italy have relatively centralized or federal structures with specific rules for PE, although Germany has shown more flexibility at the state level and Italy in the private sector. Iran faces institutional duality (the Welfare Organization and the Ministry of Education), which sometimes leads to confusion and incoherence in policy-making. Also, all developed countries have allocated a significant share of financing preschool education to the government or municipalities, which has led to a reduction in the financial burden on families and increased equitable access to PE. In Iran, the main financial burden is on families, which leads to inequality in PE access.

Similarities and differences in educational goals:

In all five countries, PE is based on the all-round development of the child - cognitive, social, emotional and physical - and the educational philosophy emphasizes play-based and exploratory learning - rather than the mere teaching of academic skills. All selected countries attach importance to creating a rich and safe learning environment and providing opportunities for the child to freely interact with peers and the teacher. Education is based on respect for the individuality and specific needs of each child and support for personalized learning, and the link between education and

development of social values (cooperation, responsibility, respect) is an integral part of the PE approach. Of course, the quality of the implementation of these goals is also important. While, England approach emphasizes development of seven areas, Japan focuses on social development and respect for the group. Germany emphasizes socio-emotional and linguistic aspects, and Italy - with its Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches-, emphasizes the child's creativity and self-expression. Iran also emphasizes the all-round development of the child along with the teaching of Islamic values, but in practice, these goals may not be fully realized due to a lack of resources and quality education. Based on the findings of this comparative research, the opportunities and challenges of each preschool education system are identified and the following suggestions are presented at the executive and practical level for improving PE in Iran:

- ❖ Management integration: Strengthening the role of “National Organization for Child Education” in order to eliminate parallel work and coordinate between related institutions.
- ❖ Educational justice: Allocating special budgets to deprived areas and developing educational infrastructure in villages.
- ❖ Developing a national framework for assessing social, emotional, and cognitive skills using tools such as portfolios and visual documentation.

4. Conclusion

The aim of study was to conduct a comparative research about PE system in Iran, Japan, England, Germany, and Italy. The findings revealed that existing differences are the result of complex interactions and overlaps between four main components: Cultural & social context, management structure, economic policies, and history of educational transformation. These components not only operate independently, but also interact with each other in the policy-making and implementation space, shaping the quality, equity, and coverage of PE.

In the cultural and social dimension, the education system of each country is a reflection of values, norms and expectations of that society. In Japan, a deep culture of collectivism, discipline and respect for social hierarchy is evident at all levels of PE. For example, even game-based innovations are implemented in the form of group and task-oriented frameworks. Also, parental pressure on academic success from a very young age has led to the boom of extracurricular programs with relatively heavy costs, as noted in OECD reports (OECD, 2019a). In Italy, the educational philosophies of Montessori and Reggio Emilia are a direct reflection of the artistic and humanistic traditions of this country. Learning environments are designed in such a way as to

foster creativity, self-expression and learning based on group projects, and family plays an important role in PE as an educational partner.

Iran, as a country with a distinct religious and cultural value system from the four selected countries, has placed moral, spiritual, and religious education goals at the center of PE educational content, although limited financial resources; although weak institutional coordination have created a significant gap between these ideal goals and implementation status, distorting educational equity. In the management structure, different governance frameworks determine the level of standardization and adaptability of policies. Germany, with its federal system, has maximized the transfer of power to the states, allowing them to adapt preschool programs to local needs - including policies for the integration of immigrants and multilingual people. However, the OECD report revealed that this same autonomy has created significant heterogeneity in the quality of PE across states (OECD, 2020). England has adopted a quasi-centralized model in which the national framework (EYFS) ensures basic quality while local councils have the power to adjust and adapt programmes. Japan and Italy also have implemented a semi-centralized structure in which ministries of education and local authorities share roles to enable PE programs to be adapted to social and cultural conditions. Iran, with its dual institutional structure and lack of integration of responsibilities, suffers from a lack of management coherence and is unable to develop and implement uniform national standards. Also, in economic policies, differences in funding patterns have had a direct impact on educational equity and PE coverage rates.

The European countries such as England, Germany and Italy, finance the majority of pre-primary education costs from the public budget and municipal grants, which has led to PE coverage rates of over 90% according to UNESCO statistics. This extensive funding has not only ensured equal access but also enabled investment in sustainable quality of PE. Japan, with its mixed model of government funding and household tuition, has placed significant economic pressure on families, which could lead to a widening opportunity gap despite universal PE coverage. Iran, with its heavy reliance on private sector investment and low government participation, is in a situation that has resulted in an urban-rural gap and severe inequality in access to PE services. This situation, similar to other developing countries, has been identified as one of the main obstacles to educational equity in promoting PE in Iran (Artipah et al., 2024).

In terms of educational content, although all selected countries have chosen the all-round development of the child - cognitive, social, emotional and physical dimensions - as the main goal of PE, their priorities and strategies differ. While the Japanese education system emphasizes social skills, teamwork, and respect for public order, Germany focuses on cultural integration and

multilingual hands-on learning. England organizes seven main areas of play-based learning into a national framework, while Italy prioritizes creativity, art, and child self-expression. Meantime, for Iranian education policymakers, the connection of moral and cultural values with PE is a priority. This harmony between cultural philosophies and educational goals has been identified in Wagner's (2014) studies as a factor in the sustainability and social acceptance of PE.

Along with these differences, significant similarities were also observed. Play-based learning, diversity of service providers (public and private), active participation of families in educational programs, and preparation of children for entry into primary education are seen in all preschool systems. These common patterns demonstrate the existence of global standards combined with adaptation to local situations that emphasize the developmental needs of children and the requirements for their successful transition to the formal education system. The outcome of this analysis - taking into account the research background- indicates that the success of preschool systems is the product of the combined management of four cultural, political, economic, and historical components. Countries such as England and Germany have been able to create this coordination are at a higher level in the indicators of quality and coverage of PE and the realization of educational justice. On the other hand, the preschool education system in Iran - despite the all efforts and progress- still faces fundamental challenges. The most important challenges include the remaining consequences of the institutional duality between Iranian Welfare Organization and Ministry of Education, strong dependence on parental tuition, lack of integrated quality standards, and weakness in training specialized human resources. This finding is consistent with the finding of Aghazadeh (2020), which shows that these challenges have prevented the full realization of the potential of preschool education to achieve the goals of comprehensive development of children. Iran can learn important lessons by benefiting from the experiences of these selected countries. Accordingly, the following suggestions should be considered by curriculum and educational planners:

- Integration and coherent policymaking: Resolve institutional duality and create a single custodian with full authority for preschool education
- Increase public investment: Preschool education should be considered a long-term investment in human development and significant public funding should be allocated to ensure equitable access
- Develop and implement national quality standards: Develop and closely monitor the implementation of quality standards for curricula, educational spaces, and human resources

Ultimately, the success of a preschool education system depends on several factors, the most important of which are political will, the allocation of adequate resources, and the existence of a clear and comprehensive educational philosophy that contributes to the all-round development of the child and his preparation for the future.

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