

A Comparative Overview of Educational Indicators in Norway, Sweden, Germany, and Iran

Flora Keysan and Radka Wildová

Charles University, Czech Republic

Abstract

Education is characterized as a structured and systematic process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes, forming a fundamental base for the progress of individuals and societies. Educational systems vary across countries, reflecting complex interactions among cultural, social, economic, and technological factors that shape how students learn and experience schooling. The present study aims to provide a descriptive comparative overview of key educational indicators in four countries, Norway, Sweden, Germany, and Iran, in order to explore similarities and differences that may inform policy and educational development. This study adopts a descriptive and synthesis-based approach with a focus on key indicators: the structure and levels of education, governance aspects, and distribution of responsibilities, evaluation and assessment strategies, and funding budgets. Findings of the study reveal considerable variations in governance structures, funding, and evaluation approaches across these countries. Norway and Sweden highlight decentralized structures and equity-based models, while Germany reflects a federal and region-specific model. Iran's educational system follows a centralized decision-making structure. Additionally, as this study employs a descriptive approach and relies on secondary data, findings are interpretive rather than evaluative or causal. Moreover, the synthesis of these key indicators provides policymakers and educators with valuable insights into different governance structures and strategies for promoting educational quality and equity. It also contributes to comparative education by providing a structured comparative overview of four educational systems.

Keywords: education, educational systems, structure of educational systems, four indicators

Author Note

Flora Keysan: ORCID  0009-0007-1164-6447

Radka Wildová: ORCID  0000-0002-5621-4433

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Flora Keysan, Department of Pre-primary and Primary Education, Faculty of Education, Charles University, Czech Republic.
Email: florakeysan@gmail.com

Introduction

Education is one of the most essential elements of any social system. According to Boavista (2017), education aims to enhance individuals' self-confidence and provide better job opportunities. Education also enables individuals to participate in public debates and advocate for healthcare and social security policies.

Europe is shaped by diverse cultures and languages, and these distinctions are noticeable in various facets, including the structural variations across different educational systems (Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of Germany [MECAG], 2014). Educational structures vary according to each country's policies, programs, and objectives. Moreover, making effective use of other countries' educational policies and experiences is highly beneficial in shaping the education systems of individual countries.

The current study aims to compare the educational systems of three developed countries, Norway, Sweden, and Germany, and a developing country, Iran, in terms of four general indicators. These indicators include the structure and levels of education, governance and distribution of responsibilities, evaluation and assessment, and funding. The structure and levels of education cover the age of children, the study duration, the categorization of education levels, and the curriculum. The governance and distribution of responsibilities deal with the divisions of educational responsibilities between sectors and organizations. The third indicator examines evaluation and assessment procedures in the selected countries, while the fourth addresses funding sources and the sectors responsible for allocating and distributing budgets among schools.

Literature Review

Educational System and Structure: Norway

Norway has a strong welfare-state model, and the state supports the economy and education (Eurydice, 2009). A fundamental principle in Norwegian educational policy is that education is available for all children, and they possess an equal entitlement to education irrespective of their location, gender, cultural, or social background (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research [NMER], 2010). Norway's educational system is highly comprehensive, and Norwegian educational policy attempts to provide equal educational chances for students regardless of their gender, cultural identity, geographic location, and economic status (Eurydice, 2010).

Additionally, all public education in Norway is provided without charge, but kindergartens have parental fees (NMER, 2010). In Norway's educational system, both public and higher education are provided free, but early childhood education and care are not free of charge. It is worth mentioning that student selection is not based solely on academic ability and the option for year repetition is not available (OECD, 2011). Moreover, although Norway spends high levels on education and the outcomes of the International Student Assessment (PISA) in the OECD's Program are at or above the OECD average, these results have raised concerns. The educational quality varies between municipalities sharing similar characteristics. This variation has emphasized the need for improved national monitoring of educational quality. During the last decade, Norway has focused more on making national tools and processes to supervise the educational system's quality at different levels to improve practices and increase students' performance (Nusche et al., 2011).

Levels of Education

According to Nusche et al. (2011), the educational system in Norway is composed of three phases: Pre-primary education phase (typical ages 1-6): This level is held in both public and private daycare centers. The national government considers objectives for the pre-primary education level and allocates funding for these centers. It is the responsibility of municipalities to run and monitor institutions. Participation at this level is not mandatory (Eurydice, 2010).

Compulsory education phase (typical ages 6-16): Norwegian students start their formal education at the age of 6. The compulsory education phase comprises ten years and is organized into the primary level (school years 1-7) as well as the lower secondary level (school years 8-10). Upper secondary education phase (typical ages 16-19): This educational level lasts three or four years and includes twelve educational programs comprising three core programs and nine vocational programs. Attendance at the upper secondary education level is optional.

According to Nusche et al. (2011), the Norwegian national curriculum for knowledge promotion aims to concentrate more on fundamental skills and result-based learning. This program encompasses the whole education system, spanning from primary level to upper secondary education level, and consists of four essential parts:

- The core curriculum: It incorporates inclusive goals for both the primary and secondary education levels, as well as explains the fundamental cultural values and educational knowledge (Nusche et al., 2011).
- The quality framework: This framework elaborates school owners' liabilities to improve education quality (Nusche et al., 2011).

- The subject curricula: This curriculum outlines student competency objectives for compulsory schooling (Years 2, 4, 7, and 10), as well as for each school year in upper secondary education (Vg1, Vg2, and Vg3). The competence objectives of an individual subject include the combination of five essential skills: verbal expression, reading literacy, numeracy, written expression, and computer literacy (Nusche et al., 2011).
- The structure of distributing teaching hours and subjects: For each subject, this structure describes the required minimum teaching hours. While school owners have the freedom to autonomously assign extra teaching hours in specific subjects, separate funding is necessary for this purpose (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research [NMER], 2010).

Notably, school owners are eager to set particular local objectives corresponding to national objectives. They are also liable to accept and perform the curriculum at the local level. Defining objectives for each year falls under the responsibility of school principals, whereas schools bear the responsibility of specifying the content, organization, and teaching methods (NMER, 2010). Moreover, the subjects covered in both primary and lower secondary levels in the Norwegian education system are “Norwegian, mathematics, social science, Christianity, Religion and Ethics Education (CREE), arts and crafts, natural science, English, foreign languages/ language in-depth studies, food and health, music, physical education, student council work, and optional program subject” (NMER, 2010, p. 4).

Governance and Distribution of Responsibilities

Norway follows an ancient and fixed tradition of school autonomy. Local communities in Norway have ownership and responsibility for individual schools instead of being under the supervision of national authorities. This decentralized running process is particularly noticeable at both primary and lower secondary education levels. Four hundred thirty municipalities manage schools, excluding a small private sector (Nusche et al., 2011). County authorities are responsible for upper-secondary education and training (NMER, 2010).

In addition, the Norwegian Parliament (*Storting*) sets general educational goals, accepts the legal structure, and establishes standards. The Ministry of Education and Research in Norway is tasked with regulating national education policies, encompassing acts, regulations, and curricula. School owners, including counties, municipalities, and private providers, are responsible for organizing and managing school services, providing resources, and improving the quality and progress of education within their relevant schools (Nusche et al., 2011).

Evaluation and Assessment

In Norway, a National Quality Assessment System (NQAS) has been developed to support education authorities, school owners, and schools in measuring students' performance and introducing appropriate strategies for their improvement. This system provides both national guidance and flexibility, granting schools and local authorities substantial autonomy to design and administer local evaluation strategies (Nusche et al., 2011).

According to Nusche et al. (2011), in the Norwegian educational system, student assessment relies on the integration of both teacher-conducted classroom evaluations and centralized assessments. Additionally, teachers bear the main responsibility for evaluating students at all levels of the school system, encompassing both formative and summative formats:

- In the 1-7 school year levels, the main objective of assessment typically revolves around both diagnostic and formative formats. At these levels, no marks are given to students.
- In the 8-10 school years and upper secondary education level, the main emphasis is on a summative format based on the overall achievement marks of students.

Funding

Norwegian counties and municipalities earmark financial support to schools in accordance with various factors, for example, students' enrollment, geographical location, and internal organization of schools (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training [NDET], 2007). They also provide budgets to finance school education, including local tax incomes and central state transfers (Eurydice, 2010).

Educational System and Structure: Sweden

The national agency for education in Sweden, or *Skolverket*, is responsible for managing the Education Act of 2010 (*Skollagen*), which oversees all levels of the Swedish educational system and emphasizes principles such as gender equality (Kandel, 1933; Jarvis, 2000; Berglund, 2017). Sweden has a comprehensive, inclusive, and fairly equitable educational system. The education system in Sweden is also free of charge for all Swedish nationals and individuals from the EU/EEA and Switzerland (Peterka et al., 2017).

According to BrandãoI (2019), in the Swedish educational system, the structure is as follows:

- Basic Education phase: Includes the Early Childhood Education stage (*förskola*), the Elementary School stage (*grundskola*), and the Upper Secondary School stage (*gymnasium*).

- Higher Education phase: Comprises Post-secondary level (*folkhögskola, kompletterand utbildning* or *yrkeshögskolan*), College level (*högskola*), and University level (*universitet*).

Levels of Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE): Participation in ECE is voluntary and may take place in public, private, or independent schools. A one-year-old Swedish child can enroll in preschool at the municipal ECE School (*förskola*) (Kazamias, 2001). In Sweden, preschool class is entirely free of charge, even for children with special needs. This class aims to simplify the transition process from the preschool level to the initial year of elementary school. In addition, the main aim of ECE level and preschool classes is to provide children with a range of pedagogic activities that inspire both the child's creativity through playing activities in groups and the development of learning, as well as help him/her understand and discover the environment (BrandãoI, 2019). It is worth noting that in Sweden, there are high enrolment rates in early childhood education (Peterka et al., 2017).

Compulsory Education: After preschool, children begin nine years of compulsory education, subdivided into three three-year periods. This stage, known as *Grundskola*, is compulsory and free of charge. The three periods are *Lågstadiet* (the first period includes the first three years), *Mellanstadiet* (the second period), and *Högstadiet* (the third period) (Makuwira & Ninnes, 2004). The education level is compulsory for all students from ages 7 to 16 (Peterka et al., 2017). Compulsory school attendance in Sweden is different from some other European countries. Swedish law emphasizes that education, not schooling, is compulsory. Thus, home-schooling is almost non-existent in Sweden (Berglund, 2017).

Secondary School or Upper Secondary Education: Secondary school education, known as *gymnasiet*, is non-compulsory and lasts three years. Although attendance is voluntary, most young people in Sweden participate. Secondary education (*gymnasieskola*) is free and offers both national and introductory programs, as well as specialized programs beyond the standard structure outlined in the national program (Noah & Eckstein, 1969).

Governance and Distribution of Responsibilities

Sweden has a decentralized education system guided by national priorities. Based on the Education Act, 290 municipalities are responsible for public schools (Peterka et al., 2017). At the national level, the central government oversees education policy, curriculum development, and national goals, supported by three independent agencies as follows:

- The Swedish National Agency for Education assesses the procedures of both municipalities and local schools. This agency, in collaboration with the Ministry, defines national objectives and curriculum, as well as produces various statistics related to education.
- The Swedish Schools Inspectorate possesses the authority to establish new autonomous schools, and ensures compliance with central laws and regulations by both municipalities and the organizers of autonomous schools and the schools themselves.
- The National Agency for Special Needs Education oversees attempts made by the government related to special educational needs.

Evaluation and Assessment

The primary emphasis on student assessment in the Swedish educational system lies in formative format during the initial stages of education. Additionally, students are encouraged to determine specific learning objectives using personalized development plans, self-assessment, and peer evaluations. Teachers use classroom-based assessments to collect various data on student development and give regular feedback to students (Peterka et al., 2017).

Additionally, the Swedish schools are mainly accountable for evaluation and assessment. The schools have two kinds of evaluation procedures: internal and external. Schools, school regulations, and compulsory education curricula determine particular internal school evaluation procedures. In this regard, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate aims to control education quality and fulfill regulations, and is also responsible for external evaluations. Moreover, in Sweden, there is a requirement to increase the evaluation procedures of schools to ensure uniformity and a clear direction toward educational development (Peterka et al., 2017). It is worth noting that there is no formal teacher appraisal system in Sweden. While the Ministry of Education and Research in Sweden is mainly accountable for creating a framework for assessing the educational system's quality, the Swedish National Agency for Education has practically the authority for system evaluation (Peterka et al., 2017).

Funding

The procedure of funding in the Swedish education system is principally public. Municipalities and autonomous education providers are responsible for financing and funding the education system. Each municipality is also accountable for deciding how resources will be distributed between schools. In both primary and secondary schools in Sweden, the budgeting process is decentralized to municipalities, with finances derived from local taxes and distributed in different forms depending on the municipality (Peterka et al., 2017). The responsibility of the

home municipality of students is to allocate school funding, regardless of whether students attend a public school or an autonomous school. It is also worth noting that the accessibility of school choice affects school funding because funding is related to students rather than schools (Peterka et al., 2017). In addition, the primary responsibility of the Swedish government is to allocate public funding for higher education institutions. Sweden's government can also allocate financial support to students through study grants and loans to meet students' living expenses (Peterka et al., 2017).

Educational System and Structure: Germany

The education system in Germany is segmented into three stages: early childhood education, primary education, and secondary education (Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of Germany, [MECAG], 2014). Germany's school system comprises public and private schools, such as religious or Waldorf (Lergetporer et al., 2017).

Levels of Education

Early Childhood Education (ECE): Educational institutions catering to children provide ECE programs until age six. These establishments are designated to either the ECE or the primary education sector based on the specific Land. While this level of education is typically not compulsory, most of the Lander authorities are given the right to make it compulsory (MECAG, 2014). Enrolment rates of German children at the ECE level are high, and participation in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) contributes to promoting equity within the educational system (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2014).

Compulsory Education: All German children enter school at six and start general compulsory schooling, which includes nine years of full-time education. They enroll in the *Grundschule*, which includes grades 1 to 4. Although the role of preschool is to guide children toward more play-oriented learning approaches, the role of primary school is to direct students toward more systematic and structured approaches to learning in an educational setting. In addition, primary school plays a role in adjusting both the format and substance of instructional programs to cater to the diverse learning needs and abilities of individual students. The primary school aims to establish the foundation for subsequent educational levels as well as lifelong learning. Moreover, at the primary school level, the curriculum emphasizes reading and writing skills, as well as basic arithmetic skills. The teaching subjects encompass German language, foundational mathematics, comprehensive *Sachunterricht* (general studies), art, music education, physical education and sports, and instruction in religious studies (MECAG, 2014).

After completing full-time mandatory education, students enter a subsequent period of part-time mandatory education, known as mandatory vocational education, which lasts for three years (MECAG, 2014).

Secondary Education: The secondary level covers grades 5/7 to 12/13 in the Lander. Its structure is segmented into diverse educational paths, and various school types bear the responsibility for them, including Hauptschule, Realschule, Gymnasium, and Schularten mit mehreren Bildungsgängen (MECAG, 2014). Students move into the upper secondary education stage after completing compulsory schooling. The kind of school is contingent on the qualifications attained and entitlements acquired upon completing lower secondary education (MECAG, 2014).

Governance and Distribution of Responsibilities

The educational system is decentralized in Germany, and the responsibilities are distributed among the Federation, the *Länder*, and local authorities (OECD, 2014). Germany's Federal Ministry of Education and Research is liable for the areas under the authority of the Federation, including overseeing education and the care of children in daycare centers and child-minding services. Moreover, the management of the education system in various domains, including the educational domain at the school level, the tertiary education sector, the adult education sector, and the continuing education domain, falls under the responsibility of the Lander (MECAG, 2014).

Evaluation and Assessment

An essential part of the comprehensive strategy for the education system is the regular assessment of student achievement (OECD, 2014). In Germany, preschool assessment depends on curriculum needs and evaluates students' knowledge, abilities, and skills, with teachers responsible for conducting the assessments. The assessment of the first two grades of primary school is a yearly report that fully describes a student's development, strengths, and weaknesses in different learning majors (MECAG, 2014). In addition, Germany has a highly structured legal framework for external school evaluation (OECD, 2014).

Funding

In Germany's education system, public primary and secondary schools are free of charge (OECD, 2014). In Germany, decisions concerning the financing of education are jointly made by the Federation, *Länder*, and local authorities (Kommunen). It is worth noting that both the *Länder*, in addition to local authorities, contribute significantly to most governmental

expenditures (MECAG, 2014). In addition, the division of duties between the Länder and local authorities plays a vital role in financing the public sector. While local authorities cover the expenses for non-teaching staff and material costs, the Lander is liable for covering the payroll for teaching staff (MECAG, 2014).

Educational System and Structure: Islamic Republic of Iran

Iranian schools come in two categories: publicly funded schools that are free of charge, and privately owned schools (Menashri, 1992). Iran's centralized education system stems from France's old education system. The central government controls the conditions of policymaking and educational decision-making. Provinces and local groups need the opportunity to create or take new actions or measures to apply their plans or notions (Behbahania, 2010). In 1951, the first transfers occurred, and the provincial and city departments assumed control of specific aspects of crucial authorities and took on responsibilities, including managing employment, facilitating the mobility of teachers and staff in provinces, distributing funds, and handling budgets for certain expenditures. Acting on the Ministry of Education's behalf, the related departments in the provincial centers and cities take on more power and responsibilities; nonetheless, the central government possesses decision-making authority and operates in a centralized manner (Behbahania, 2010). While the Ministry of Education in Iran is dedicated to promoting the process of decentralization, predicting the forthcoming developments in education within this country remains challenging due to ongoing cultural shifts (Madandar et al., 2012). Additionally, some crucial factors are mainly to be noticed in the performance of the Iranian education system, including principals, teachers, student councils, parent-teacher associations, and school councils (Moradia et al., 2012). It is important to note that the educational structure of Iran has four stages: pre-primary education stage, primary education stage, lower secondary education stage or guidance level, and upper secondary education stage or high school.

Levels of Education

Iran's formal education system encompasses primary education (six years) and secondary education (six years). The new school year commences on September 21 and extends until June 21 of the following year. To enter university, each student must get a high school diploma (Bakhshalizadeh, 2021).

Pre-primary education level: In Iran, the pre-primary education phase lasts one year, and children typically begin this stage at the age of five. The program's primary focus at this level is on behavioral and pedagogical techniques, fundamental “life skills, natural sciences, hygiene,

literacy, history, and religious history and practice” (Madandar et al., 2012, p. 3). In addition, the pre-primary education level is non-compulsory and helps children enter the compulsory primary education level. Regular activities related to the pre-primary level and a one-month Farsi course constitute the curriculum of this level. The Farsi course is a requirement in those areas where the primary language is not Persian (Bakhshalizadeh, 2021).

According to Bakhshalizadeh (2021), the primary aims of the pre-primary education level include:

- to support children’s physical, mental, emotional, and social development
- to improve socio-emotional growth and self-confidence
- to encourage participation in group activities
- to reinforce religious perspectives and ethical values
- to improve oral language progress and develop communication skills

Primary education: The first level of formal compulsory education, or primary education, consists of two periods, each lasting three years. It covers grades 1 to 6 (6–11 years old). In primary education, one teacher typically teaches all subjects, apart from religion, art, and physical education, in the first period (grades 1-3) (Bakhshalizadeh, 2021). Additionally, the primary school (Dabestan) in Iran includes “Qur’an, Persian composition, dictation, Persian reading comprehension, social studies, arts, hygiene, natural sciences, mathematics, and physical education, but the primary emphasis is on reading comprehension (Madandar et al., 2012, p. 4).

According to Bakhshalizadeh (2021), the crucial goals of the primary level are as follows:

- Contribute to moral development
- Promote literacy, numeracy, and social skills
- Train personal hygiene

Lower secondary education or guidance level: Following primary school, students begin middle school or the guidance level (Rahnamayi) (Menashri, 1992). The subsequent stage of compulsory education consists of a three-year lower secondary phase. It includes grades 7-9 for 12–14-year-old students (Bakhshalizadeh, 2021). In addition, the lower secondary curriculum encompasses subjects, for instance, “history, geography, Arabic, vocational training, foreign languages, and defense preparation,” but the primary emphasis is placed on mathematics and natural sciences (Madandar et al., 2012, p. 4). In addition to the primary education subjects, this

stage has second language instruction, vocational education, and defense education for boys (Bakhshalizadeh, 2021).

This educational level emphasizes guiding students to explore a specific area of expertise rather than instructing general knowledge (Madandar et al., 2012). According to Bakhshalizadeh (2021), the essential purposes of the lower secondary education stage include:

- Promote moral and intellectual skills
- Enhance general knowledge
- Reinforce academic discipline and improve scientific imagination

Upper secondary or high school level: This stage comprises three years, including grades 10–12 for 15–17-year-old students. They can select one of the three study programs (academic, technical, vocational, or KarDanesh). Each program includes various goals and is planned for students with different skills and interests. For instance, academic programs help students enter university; these programs emphasize mathematics, natural science, or the humanities. The other two programs help students enter the labor market after graduating high school. They can receive a post-diploma degree and later have the chance to enter a vocational college (Bakhshalizadeh, 2021).

Governance and Distribution of Responsibilities

K-12 education falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, while higher education is overseen by the Iranian Ministry of Science and Technology (Menashri, 1992). In addition, the Ministry of Education bears the responsibility for “educational planning, financing, administration, curriculum, textbook development, teacher training, grading, and examinations” (Madandar et al., 2012, p.2). As per the constitution of Iran, the government is dedicated to offering free education for students until the end of high school (Ansari, 2016). Moreover, the Organization for Educational Research and Planning, along with the Welfare Organization, supervises and prepares educational programs for preschool centers (Bakhshalizadeh, 2021).

Evaluation and Assessment

It is the teacher's responsibility to assess educational activities. There are two types of assessments in Iran's educational system: continuous and formative. Continuous assessment depends on the participation of students in educational tasks, for example, completing homework, participating in class questions, and undertaking out-of-class activities. Examinations may be written, oral, or practical, depending on the subject content, with written exams being the most common. The minimum passing score for progression to the next grade is ten, and the

maximum is 20 (Madandar et al., 2012). Testing and assessment are strictly based on the content of instructional textbooks, and national exams are also used to evaluate students' overall performance (Madandar et al., 2012).

Funding

In Iran, the general budget finances all education expenses, as the government is responsible for meeting the needs of education due to its significant social benefits (Behbahania, 2010; Ansari, 2016). In addition to government funding, non-profit educational institutions, parent-educator associations, municipal bodies, donors supporting school buildings, student councils, boarding schools, and the boards of trustees of certain schools also play a substantial role in fostering public participation in the education system (Ahmadi et al., 2016).

Methodology

Nature of the Study

This study aims to provide a descriptive comparative overview of key educational indicators. The present study used a desk-based comparative policy analysis approach, focusing on the synthesis of secondary data to investigate and compare key indicators of four countries: Norway, Sweden, Germany, and Iran. Relying exclusively on secondary data, the study analyzed policy reports, statistical data, and existing literature to determine similarities and differences in the educational indicators of the chosen countries.

Criteria for Selection of Countries

Three main criteria were considered to purposively choose the four countries:

Diversity of governance structures: Norway and Sweden demonstrate decentralized systems. Germany has a federal structure, but Iran runs a highly centralized educational system.

Variety in socio-economic and cultural settings: The study samples include two Nordic countries (Norway and Sweden), a federal European economy (Germany), and a developing Middle Eastern country (Iran).

Accessibility of reliable data: International organizations (the OECD and Eurydice) and national reports offer accessible and reliable secondary data for comparative purposes.

Sources of Data

The present study employed exclusively secondary data, including international educational reports and databases (OECD and Eurydice), national policy documents, annual reports, and statistics from the ministries of education, as well as prior academic studies that

offer interpretive information. The collection of these sources ensured the richness and reliability of the data while providing multiple perspectives for analysis.

Analytical Approach

This study utilized a descriptive comparative approach with a structured basis, focusing on four key indicators widely recognized in the field of comparative education: structure and levels of education, governance and distribution of responsibilities, evaluation and assessment strategies, and funding budgets. Information collected from secondary sources was systematically organized under these educational indicators. The synthesis of information highlighted similarities and differences across the selected countries. Findings and interpretations were descriptive rather than causal or evaluative.

Results and Discussion

The present study employed a desk-based comparative policy analysis approach. This section aims to synthesize the descriptive results obtained from secondary sources across four key indicators: structure and levels of education, governance and distribution of responsibilities, evaluation and assessment strategies, and funding and budgeting.

Structure and Levels of Education

All four countries share the fundamental stages of education, but they differ in how these stages are organized and when students are directed into different educational pathways. In Norway and Sweden, universal early childhood education is highlighted, and upper secondary education is broadly available, emphasizing equitable access. The educational system in Germany offers differentiated secondary school types, which can create regional inequalities. Iran has a highly centralized system, and early childhood education is comparatively less accessible.

Governance and Distribution of Responsibilities

Governance models vary across the four countries. Norway and Sweden follow decentralized systems with local municipal management; Germany operates under a federal model with a multi-level structure across the Länder; and Iran maintains a highly centralized model with ministerial control, ensuring uniformity in policy and curricula.

Evaluation and Assessment

Assessment approaches combine teacher-based assessments with national assessments. Nordic countries (Norway and Sweden) emphasize formative and classroom-based assessments

alongside national tests, while maintaining a strong focus on teacher autonomy. Germany combines teacher assessments with structured external evaluations, while Iran's evaluation system depends on high-stakes national exams and classroom assessments, closely aligned with textbook content.

Funding and Budgeting

Funding systems vary in terms of sources, methods of distribution, and the extent to which funds are allocated to individual students or managed centrally. In Norway and Sweden, high public investment is the main funding source, and municipalities hold primary responsibility for distributing these funds. In Germany, the federal government, Länder, and municipalities share responsibility for financing, teacher salaries, and major recurring costs. Iran relies primarily on the central government budget and public contributions, such as non-profit organizations and parents.

As this study is descriptive and relies exclusively on secondary data, the findings are interpretive rather than causal. Nevertheless, the results suggest important implications for policy and practice. Governance models may benefit from balancing local autonomy with national guidance to promote equity. Evaluation mechanisms should emphasize formative approaches and teacher-based assessments while limiting overreliance on high-stakes national examinations. Equitable funding remains critical, particularly in ensuring additional resources for disadvantaged regions. Promoting long-term equity also requires expanding access to high-quality early childhood education.

Conclusion

The present study compared the educational systems of four countries: Norway, Sweden, Germany, and Iran, focusing on four key indicators: structure and levels of education, governance and distribution of responsibilities, evaluation and assessment, and funding. Various reasons exist for selecting the countries of this study. Prior scholarship has noted the significant distance separating developing countries from economically advanced education systems (Franco, 1992). In addition, they are education systems shaped by distinct historical trajectories, despite certain surface similarities (Franco, 1992, pp. 34–35). Moreover, it is customary for nations such as Iran to acquire international expertise and adopt models from more advanced countries (Mahzoun, 2019).

The comparative synthesis revealed clear differences between the Nordic countries (Norway and Sweden), Germany's federal model, and Iran's highly centralized structure. The priority in the educational systems of Norway and Sweden is equity, achieved through

implementing comprehensive frameworks, play-driven early childhood education, and strong formative assessment approaches. Germany's federal structure implements early tracking that can increase inequalities in certain areas. In contrast, Iran's centralized system reinforces consistency and uniformity but limits local adaptability, improvement, and responsiveness.

Several lessons emerge for developing countries such as Iran. Broadening the availability of high-quality ECE, delaying early tracking while integrating national supervision with local autonomy can contribute to more equitable outcomes and improved learning achievements. Decreasing the overreliance on high-stakes national exams and employing formative, teacher-based assessments can promote in-depth learning. Moreover, introducing equitable funding models that provide disadvantaged areas with additional resources can mitigate ongoing inequalities in the quality of education.

Future research should transcend descriptive comparisons by conducting field studies and incorporating structured comparative education models to investigate how variations in governance structures, assessment methods, and funding mechanisms affect educational outcomes. Such examinations can offer practical insights for policymakers aiming to develop education systems that promote equity and are responsive to local contexts.

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