

Inside Japanese Cram Schools

The Workings, the Outcomes and the Experiences

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Understanding the Appeal of Cram Schooling.....	6
2.1 The Japanese School System.....	6
2.2 Exploring Cram Schooling.....	10
3. Recent Discourse on Cram Schooling in Japan.....	14
3.1 First Dimension: Negative Impacts of Extracurricular Activities.....	14
3.2 Second Dimension: Inequality Created by Cram Schooling.....	19
3.3 Introducing a Third Dimension: Insiders' Perspective on Cram Schooling.....	26
4. Insiders' Perspective on Cram Schooling: an Analysis.....	28
4.1 Methodology.....	28
4.2 Participants.....	30
4.3 Results.....	30
5. Conclusion.....	43
Appendices.....	46
A. A Closer Look at the Participants.....	46
B. List of Possible Interview Questions for Cram School Students.....	53
C. List of Possible Interview Questions for Cram School Teachers.....	55
Bibliography.....	57

1. Introduction

“I think it would be best to change the current [Japanese] education system. I believe that in today’s education system, [students] *have* to go to cram schools. I do not think that is right.” (Ran, personal interview).

In the highly competitive Japanese education system, students are taught early on that the main goal of studying is getting into an *ichiryū daigaku*, an elite university. This will lead to a good job at a big company, where both the salary as well as the social status are high. The road to admission to an elite university does not start at the university entrance examinations (*nyūgaku shiken*), but years earlier. For regular school¹ is often seen as insufficient, many parents send their children to cram schools (*juku*). These are private supplementary educational institutions and are a common phenomenon in Japan. Many Japanese students’ childhood revolve around going to these cram schools, which they attend after going to their regular school, sometimes twenty hours per week and even during vacations. The preparation for these examinations, the act of taking them (*juken*) and the competition around entering elite schools (*juken kyōsō*), are referred to as examination war (*juken sensō*) and examination hell (*juken jigoku*).

As terms such as “examination hell” illustrate: there are many discussions revolving around these entrance examinations and the cram schools tailoring to them, in both the Japanese society as well as in academic literature. First of all, there are concerns (cram) schooling puts too much pressure on children, leading to stress, bullying and even suicide (Frost, 1973; Field, 1995; Roesgaard, 2006). Secondly, the difference in the cultural capital of the parents limit some of them in their ability to provide the best education for their children, which results in

¹ I have chosen to refer to schools that are non-cram schools as “regular schools,” to avoid confusion. “Regular school” in this study thus stands for the school students go to from Monday to Friday, whether this is an elementary school or secondary school, or a private, public or national institution.

unequal cram school access and thus creates unequal opportunities in Japan's education system (Fujita, 1989; Kikkawa, 2004; Kariya 2013).

A third dimension I want to add to these two, which has yet to be studied in-depth, is the perspective of the ones in the cram school system: the students going to cram school and the teachers of cram schools. In a documentary by TV Tokyo, children in their last year of elementary school are asked why they go to cram school, to which they answer "to study." When asked if they think their regular school is not sufficient, the children answer "just school is not enough. I study at cram school, and I play in [my regular] school" (Nikkei Supesharu, 2010). These children went to Sanaru Yobikō, in the documentary mentioned as the number one cram school of the country. Their answers were likely self-censored, for their teachers were present during the interview. I am interested in the unfiltered opinions. I want to know how the students inside the system experience this system, and how this corresponds to what is being said about them. Therefore, the research question I seek to answer in this study is: How do the participants of Japanese cram schooling experience the cram schooling system and do their opinions match the criticisms voiced by outsiders? Outsiders here are academic scholars, the media and policy makers.

Through semi-constructed interviews I will examine the unfiltered opinions of students attending cram schools and cram school teachers, how they experience this system and how this corresponds to what is being said about them in academic literature, the media and by the government. Comparing statistics might give an unbiased view on this debate, however, qualitative research will provide an insight into the minds of the participants. The opinions of students and teachers in this debate are important, since they are at the center of the discussion, the object everyone is writing about. Through their stories, I hope to shine light on all sides of the discussion on Japanese education. Therefore, the following questions were put to the interviewees: Are the participants aware of the unequal opportunity patterns, or do they agree

with the workings of the system? Do they think cram school is too hard on the students? Do they think the Japanese education system can still function without these cram schools? Are cram schools necessary? Would abolishing cram school mean more free time and equality?

To understand these interviews, this study will first map out the Japanese education system in chapter 2, focusing on its cram schools. Chapter 3 will first be zooming in on criticisms around cram schooling: the first dimension of cram schooling being too hard, the second dimension of cram schooling creating inequality and more on the third dimension of the insider's perspective. Chapter 4 covers the interviews, followed by the conclusion.

2. Understanding the Appeal of Cram Schooling

Attending cram school seems to be an unavoidable step in educational success in modern Japanese society, even though it is not part of compulsory education. By introducing the Japanese school system, the first half of this chapter provides background information to then continue with explaining the workings of these cram schools, and shed light on why regular school and cram school seem to be intertwined, overlapping and supplementary to each other.

2.1 The Japanese School System

The Japanese education system is often the focus of discussion. On the one hand, it has received praise by many, based on school results and outcomes of internationally recognized tests like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). As can be seen in PISA outcomes, Japan always scores top ten worldwide (OECD 2012, 1). On the other hand, there has also been a lot of criticism expressed towards the Japanese education system, concerning the workload of the children, the role of socio-economic background in achieving success and the diploma society, to name a few. Throughout the decades, the Japanese school system underwent several changes, in attempts to fix said problems. For the purpose of this study we will look only at the post-war Japanese education with an emphasis on the current system. The Japanese school system as we know it today is largely modeled after the American school system, with the university faculties being based on the German school system. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is responsible for Japan's education system as a whole. MEXT decides if new schools will be established, determines the budgets of national educational institutions, and decides on the subsidy of private educational institutions (Nuffic 2015, 6-7).

The fiscal year, as well as the academic year in Japan, starts in April and lasts until March, with two school semesters of both twenty weeks. Japan used to have a school week from Monday until Saturday, but in 2002 this changed to a five-day school week, with Saturdays and Sundays off (Nishino and Larson 2003, 25). The average school day for a Japanese elementary or secondary school student starts around 8:45 AM and ends around 3:15 PM. Subjects range from Japanese, English, mathematics, social studies and science to music and physical education (Nuffic 2015, 7-8). After school hours, school clubs called *bukatsu* or *sākuru*, the latter being less demanding, are very popular. These clubs are affiliated with the school and usually take place on the school premises. The club activities can range from activities such as sports, playing in a band or practicing art and crafts. As of 2014, approximately 74 percent of middle school students and 49 percent of high school students belong to a sports club within the school. For cultural clubs, the numbers are 17 percent and 22 percent respectively (MEXT, via Van Ommen 2015, 85-86).

In contrast to the school systems of European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands where children in secondary school are separated into different levels, all children follow more or less the same curriculum in Japan's secondary education. However, there are three different types of schools an educational institution can be categorized into, namely public (*kōritsu*), national (*kokuritsu*) and private (*shiritsu*) schools. These different kinds of schools can form their own identity within a somewhat standardized curriculum. The tuition fee is another varying factor. In general, the tuition for private institutions is the highest, whereas national schools are free, according to the Basic Act on Education Article 5 (4): "no tuition fee shall be charged for compulsory education in schools established by the national and local prefectural governments" (MEXT 2006). However, this does not have to correlate with the quality of the education offered (OECD 2011, 114, 126). Where in primary education, most of the schools are public, there is an obvious shift when going up the levels of education. Most of

the universities in Japan are private, followed by public and then national universities (MEXT 2012, 1-2).

Compulsory education in Japan starts at the age of six. Primary school (*shōgakkō*) lasts for six years, followed by the also compulsory middle school (*chūgakkō*) of three years. There are relatively few schools where both secondary educational stages, middle and high school, are united in one so-called *chūtōgakkō*. Most children continue their education by going to high school (*kōtōgakkō*) after graduating middle school, even though this is not a part of the compulsory education set by Japanese law. In 1950, 1960 and 1970 the rates of Japanese students advancing to high school were 42.5 percent, 57.7 percent and 82.1 percent respectively. These numbers have drastically risen up to the 1980s, with 94.2 percent of all Japanese students in 1980 enrolling into high school. As of 2013, 96.6 percent of Japanese students advance to high school. These numbers are showing major increase in advancement rate of high school students in the past 60+ years (MEXT 2016). After high school, Japanese students could enroll into a variety of educational institutions to continue their education. A few examples are the vocational schools (*senmon gakkō*) which often provide two to three year studies (Cummings 1979, 92), and the two-year so-called *tankidaigaku* which are noticeably and traditionally more popular among female students (MEXT 2007), accounting for almost 90 percent of the students in these institutions as of 2008 (Jones 2011, 19). In 2008, 43 percent of the adult population completed tertiary education (*ibid*, 5). In this thesis, however, only the four-year universities will be taken into regard. In 2013, this concerned 614,183 students, about half of the high school graduates (MEXT 2016). The Japanese education system considered in this thesis thus looks as follows when put into years: 6-3-3-4. This stands for six years of elementary school, three years each for middle and high school, followed by four years of university.

Between the different stages of education, there are often entrance examinations before enrolling into the next stage. For example, third year middle school students will often take an

entrance examination to get into the high school of their preference. The most spoken and written about, however, is the entrance examination to get into university. Although there are different types of entrance examinations to get into the university of your choice, the one most often referred to as “the entrance examination,” is known as the National Center Test for University Admissions (*daigaku nyūshi sentā shiken*) (National Center for University Examinations 2019). Every year these written tests take place in January at multiple locations throughout the country. Spread out over two days, they test the test takers’ Japanese, English, and mathematics skills among other things. Universities can also have their own entrance examination. For example, Japan’s number one university Tokyo University has its own entrance examination. Such examinations usually take place in February, after the Center Test. Most students like to spread their chances and test for multiple universities. However, it is not feasible to go to every university’s entrance examination. Not only is this impossible schedule-wise (for example public universities only offer their examinations on two occasions), it is also rather expensive. The fees of taking an entrance examination are a sufficient means of income for Japanese universities (Rohlen 1983, 93). Another method to enter a university is through the Admission Office (AO). The AO takes place in September and results are published around December, before the Center Test. The big difference with the AO and Center Test is that you can earn a spot in the university of your preference by recommendation (*suisen nyūgaku*) or by interviews or essays (Kariya 2013, 116). This causes the AO to be more personal than the Center Test or universities’ entrance examinations, where nothing, from teachers’ recommendations, high grades in secondary school, extracurricular activities, personal character, or special talents, contributes to admittance (Rohlen 1983, 94). There are more variations in entrance examinations, like the *kikokusei nyūshi*, aimed at Japanese children who grew up abroad and return to Japan to go to university (Okano and Tsuneyoshi 2001, 4). However, this study will

henceforward only mention the Center Test, entrance examinations by specific universities and the AO.

Since not all universities have the same level of prestige, the competition to get into popular or elite universities is fierce. Especially the elite universities and medical schools have many more applications than spots. Rankings such as the ones listed in the monthly published magazine *Keisei Jidai* from the company Obunsha (Ono 2007, 273; Cummings 1979, 85) used to form a reference for upcoming university students. Ironically, a difficult entrance examination is said to enhance the school's status (Rohlen 1983, 98), making the school more popular and making the competition even fiercer. To get the best preparation, many students have extra schooling on top of going to regular school, because often it is thought that going to regular school is not enough to prepare oneself for the entrance examination, even with good grades (OECD 2011, 111). Therefore, there is an option to get extra schooling outside of your regular school, as seen in multiple countries. These institutions are referred to as cram schools (*juku*) or preparatory schools (*yobikō*).

2.2 Exploring Cram Schooling

Cram school is a phenomenon that is not universally known, but not unique to Japan. In the Netherlands, entrance examinations are absent, and the only cram schools available are thus cram schools for those who have a hard time passing their subjects in regular school. Even then, children often only ever take extra lessons after school for the specific subject they are failing at. In Japan, but also in South Korea and China (Yamato and Zhang 2017, 339), cram schools with a main focus on passing (university) entrance examinations are very common. Nearly one-third of high school students attend independent private schools in Japan, well above the OECD average of 5.5 percent in 2007 (Jones 2011, 8).

In post-war Japan, the whole industry around passing the entrance examinations first emerged, which then became a widespread phenomenon during the 1960s (Yamato and Zhang 2017, 329). Floors full of exam-oriented books and materials such as desks with built-in timers in department stores have become a common sight, as well as companies providing the service of practice tests (*mogi shiken*), and entrance examinations of the previous years are published in book format by the universities themselves. Cram schools also became more popular in post-war Japan, and became a booming business from the 1960s onwards. One of the reasons for this boom is because from the late 1950s, information on rankings of schools universities became a lot more accessible, like in the magazine *Keisetsu Jidai*, mentioned previously. This caused parents to search for special schools and strategies that might provide their children with an advantage. The conventional strategies were to hire private tutors and to enroll the children in a cram school (Cummings 1979, 85). The business of providing extra guidance, often aimed at passing an entrance examination, was so lucrative, that in the mid-1970s even a movie company, several publishing firms and a department store all entered the market to set up their own franchise system (Rohlen 1983, 101-104). The cram school market was expanding so massively in the 1970s, that Japanese media referred to these days as *ranjuku jidai*, the *ranjuku* times. This is both interpretable as ‘something overripe,’ as well as ‘cram school overflow’ (Mawer 2015, 132). Even nowadays, there are multiple nationwide cram school companies, as well as many small cram schools.

Cram schools in Japan come in different formats. You can get extra schooling by following cram school lessons broadcasted on television, often a popular option for children who live in the countryside or on a remote island. Another option is to go to your local cram school ran by volunteers, often retired teachers, or you could go to a more traditional cram school, with classes usually taught by university students. These days, computer cram schools are becoming more and more the standard, with one (professional) teacher overlooking all the

students and answering their questions. There are also more liberal cram schools, where instead of focusing on entrance examinations, students are challenged to use their intelligence creatively. For the children who have a hard time at school and wish to get their grades up, there is the option of going to cram schools focusing on reviewing. Students who failed to get into their preferred high school or university, and who would rather devote another year of full-time preparation than settle for a second-class high school or university, become *rōnin*, a term once used for *samurai* without a lord to serve (Okano and Tsuchiya 1999, 71). The proportion of students entering university with *rōnin* experience averages about 30 percent, and may even exceed 60 percent among the top universities (Ono 2006, 271).

Attending cram school may provide an advantage over not attending, but there are also many different types of cram schools, tailored to the different needs of the students. *Gakushū juku* are cram schools specializing in instruction of academic school subjects relevant for entrance examinations, or simply said, these are cram schools focused on reviewing. *Shingaku juku* on the other hand provide preparatory education for entrance examinations, usually targeting academically better performing students, who aim for the elite universities. Apart from the different aims and formats in teaching styles, there is also the difference of *kobetsujuku* and *shūdan juku*: one-on-one or cram school lessons in group session (Cummings 1979, 87, 90; Mawer 2015, 136-137). Since there is such a variety in formats, there is also a difference in average hours per week of attending, materials used such as textbooks and, of course, tuition fees. There are also cram schools aimed at specific universities, such as Waseda University or Tokyo University, both seen as elite universities in Japan. Students and their parents might already eye a certain university for years before taking the entrance examination.

Illustrating the life of a cram school attendee, Kittaka writes in *The Japan Times* about cram school-goer Manami (an alias), who is in her last year of elementary school. Manami had been attending cram school for the last three years, building up to three weekday evenings and

most of Saturday. “Three years of late nights, limited free time and piles of homework culminated in a round of entrance exams last month. Manami passed the test to attend her school of choice and can now finally relax and enjoy the remaining few weeks of elementary school with her friends” (Kittaka 2013). This is just one of the examples of students Kittaka mentions, who started attending cram school from an early age, making long hours in expensive shadow education. The term “shadow education” was established after Bray’s (1999) UNESCO report in private out-of-school supplementary educational services in different countries. Mawer describes that “shadow education” is frequently used as a metaphor for the relationship between formal (regular) schooling and cram school, with cram school being the shadow of regular school (Mawer 2015, 135; Yamato and Zhang 2017, 330). Although cram schools are not part of compulsory education in Japan, they are seen as complimentary to regular schooling (Sato 2005). However, considering the expensive and time-consuming nature of cram schools, what does this system mean for the pressure put on Japanese students? Furthermore, are these cram schools accessible to everyone?

3. Recent Discourse on Cram Schooling in Japan

Most of the returning critiques in recent literature on Japanese education with a focus on cram schooling can be divided into two dimensions: the first one is about cram schooling being too hard on the children attending cram school, a topic of debate in both Japanese society and academic literature. The second dimension focuses on accessibility of cram schools, and brings the debate of equality to this study, a major topic in academic literature on Japanese education. A third dimension added by this study, is a seemingly overlooked dimension of the insiders' perspective on experiencing cram schooling.

3.1 First Dimension: Negative Impacts of Extracurricular Activities

The Japanese school system, revolving around entrance examinations to get into the best educational institution possible, comes at a high price for students because of the years of preparation needed. This pressure put on students is not good for their mental health, creativity or for their much-needed free time. It is thus not surprising that there are many critiques on this system, one of them being the first dimension of putting too much pressure on the students. Apart from regular school, it is expected that children also participate in school clubs (*bukatsu*) and a lot of the students go to cram school as well. Since 74 percent of middle school students and 49 percent of high school students participate in sports club activities, and 17 percent and 22 percent respectively in cultural clubs, it can be concluded the majority of Japanese students are a member of a school club (MEXT via Van Ommen 2015, 85-86). For 2013, the national average attendance rate for cram schools was about 50 percent for elementary school students, 60 percent for middle school students (Mawer 2015, 132), and over 30 percent for high school students (Jones 2011, 8). This shows a majority of Japanese students are spending their free

time on school clubs and cram school. The expectations in education in and outside of school and the pressure put on the students are in line with *bunburyōdō*, “the way of both pen and sword,” a Japanese ideal where a warrior is not only great at martial arts (*bu*) but also at academics (*bun*). Van Ommen draws the comparison to modern-day Japan, and states that this concept still holds much value, and that consequently the balance of academics and extracurricular activities is idealized, both by teachers as well as students (Van Ommen 2015, 95). These two factors of attending school clubs and cram school together form the first dimension, with the correlation of being too hard on students, giving them too much stress.

Over the years, many scholars have addressed the pressures on Japanese school children. Field, who researched the well-being of school going children in Japan, reported health problems such as hair loss and high blood pressure, attributable to the pressures of cram school attendance. In addition, she also mentioned the problem of *ijime*, or bullying in regular school, coming from these pressures as well (Field 1995, 53). Roesgaard addressed cramming for entrance examinations as a very time-consuming aspect of Japanese children’s lives. She continues that cramming is often accused of leading to loss of freedom, individuality and creativity, causing problems such as bullying, violence, truancy and adolescent suicide (Roesgaard 2006, 1-2), which could be seen as an escalation of the issues that Field brought up a decade earlier. Frost already linked the stress coming from these entrance examinations with suicide back in 1973, by pointing out that the age-group concerned with university entrance showed the highest incidence of suicide in Japan. Furthermore, suicide rates always peaks in March, when the result of these entrance examinations are made public (Frost 1973, 131).

The school system has also been criticized of being excessively uniform, rigid, restrictive of children’s freedom, focused on the goal of entrance examinations and concerned with inculcating knowledge at the expense of self-motivated inquiry and creative thought (Cave 2007, 21-23). Criticisms on the school system being too rigid in both academic literature as

well as the media led to the *yutori* reform in 2002, to encourage creativity (Jones 2011, 12-13) and to give students some much needed breathing space. *Yutori kyōiku*, or *yutori* education, often loosely translated as free or relaxed education, was first mentioned in the 1970s, long anticipated, announced in the 1990s and finally installed completely in 2002 (Mawer 2015, 133). The main change *yutori* brought was a 30 percent reduction in curriculum and a 10 percent cut in the hours of academic instruction (Shoppa 1993, 205), as well as the introduction of a five-day school week. In addition, the government relaxed grading practices and introduced “integrated learning classes” (*sōgō gakushū*) without textbooks in an effort to help students think independently and reduce the importance of rote learning (Jones 2011, 13). Kariya translated a passage of the report introducing *yutori* education which the Central Council for Education (*Chūō Kyōiku Shingikai*) released in 1996:

“There is a view that thinks excessive exam competition is gradually easing as the decline in the birthrate continues, but we believe that on the contrary, the situation is getting even worse at present: increasing attendance at cram schools and the ever younger age at which exam competition commences are symbols that many children and their parents are getting caught up in the exam competition to get into universities and senior high schools, and that the trend is even spreading to some elementary school pupils. Excessive exam competition is a major factor overburdening children’s lives and depriving them of breathing space. As things stand, children have their nerves worn down by excessive entrance exam competition, lack sufficient opportunities to have the kind of life experiences, social experiences and natural experiences that are desirable in youth, and find it difficult to lead a spiritually fulfilling life. A situation where even elementary school children are studying at cram schools until late at night cannot possibly be good for personality formation” (Kariya 2011c, 117-188).

The introduction of *yutori* education was supposed to lead to a more meritocratic education system, and allow students to develop a more diverse set of abilities, beyond cramming. By giving students more breathing space, more time to do other things than studying, it was hoped that this would relieve some stress and pressure, and that they would spend more time with their family, be more creative and become more social (Kariya 2011c, 116-118; OECD 2011, 107-108). Unfortunately, many adolescents still spend their Saturdays studying and taking classes in cram school, with no gain in leisure (Nishino and Larson 2003, 25). Even more so, a different trend arose: as a result of the reduction in formal school time, parents placed even more importance on cram schooling. Nowadays, going to a cram school seems to be the norm rather than the exception. Criticism on the 2002 revisions led to more revisions in 2008, implemented in 2012. These are referred to as *datsu yutori kyōiku*, meaning “moving away from *yutori kyōiku*.” These 2012 revisions included an increase of overall class hours for the first time since the 1970s (Mawer 2015, 134). Ultimately the *yutori* reform failed to create more free time and subsequent reforms added even further hours of schooling.

Apart from cram schooling, other extracurricular activities include participating in school clubs. These clubs might seem relaxing, yet research on the moods of students attending school cram schools and/or club activities show otherwise. Nishino and Larson first acknowledge that Japanese society promotes adolescents’ participation in disciplined self-development activities, such as school clubs and cram school. Then they state that these activities can create additional demands on the students’ free time as well as additional stress, and could leave the students exhausted. Their research on the mood of students during free time activities, such as school clubs, playing games and attending cram school, shows high levels of stress during cram school, as opposed to mildly stressed during school club activities, and not stressed while playing games. The students report feeling “constrained” and “tense.” 41 Percent

of middle school students and 35 percent of high school students also report they would rather be doing something else. After the stress and demands of schoolwork, cram school and school clubs, watching television or gaming often remains the only type of leisure Japanese students have energy for (Nishino and Larson 2003, 23-24, 29, 31). Van Ommen states that during his time as a member of a soccer school club at a Japanese high school, he went from “only being able to sleep on a bed to falling asleep practically anywhere, including the daily morning train,” when illustrating how demanding (sports) school clubs often are. He further makes clear that most third year high school students quit school clubs to make time to study for entrance examinations, because combining these two is nearly impossible (Van Ommen 2015, 93). In the 1970s, it was already apparent that especially high school students would abandon school club activities and spend more time on studying, resulting in a decline in exercise and leisure (Cummings 1979, 91). This is confirmed in graphs provided by the OECD, where participation in after-school education for primary and middle school students is shown. Going up school years, the line of “non-academic activities,” such as playing the piano, swimming lessons and calligraphy classes, drops. This means that students are participating less and less in these activities as they get older. Simultaneously, the line of cram school attendance only goes up (Jones 2011, 15), implying that any leisure after-school activities were replaced by cram school sessions.

In the line of *bunburyōdō*, meaning both the pen and the sword, and still a relevant concept in modern Japan, both cram school and school clubs are important. However, school clubs need to make room for cram schooling when entrance examinations approach, thus the main focus still appears to be on good results in entrance examinations. Even though there have been reforms over the years, the Japanese school system as-is still proves to be very stressful on the children. Forty years ago, Cummings wrote “the growing public concern with the examination system is based on the fear that the involvement and competition it generates have

caused a decline in the quality of adolescent life” (Cummings 1979, 90). Four decades later, nothing seems to have changed. There have been reforms, but these did not have the aspired effect. The dislike of competition which set in motion the educational reforms, ironically had the effect of drawing many more people into educational competition (Kariya 2011c, 122). Thus, Japanese education and extracurricular activities still cause stress and deprive Japanese students of the much-needed free time.

3.2 Second Dimension: Inequality Created by Cram Schooling

The second dimension focuses on the accessibility of cram schools, and will bring the debate of inequality to this study. It has commonly been assumed that through academic achievement in Japan’s educational meritocracy, all students are offered equal life chances, regardless of their social origin or class background. Moreover, most Japanese tended to think they belonged to the middle class (Kariya 2011b, 87), undermining problems such as inequality of opportunity. It was also thought that anyone could get a perfect score on a test if they tried hard enough, regardless of the circumstances one was born into, expressed with the words “*ganbareba dekiru*” (“all are able, if they only put their minds to it”). In short, every child was thought to have unlimited academic potential (Kariya 2011c, 109; Kariya 2013, 104). If you just tried hard enough, no matter your circumstances, you could come on top of the exam war, go to an elite university and get a prestigious job in Japan’s meritocratic society.

Meritocracy (*nōryokushugi*) is a term that describes a system, where one’s merit brings success such as educational attainment or political power. Merit is generally associated with talent, skill, intelligence, ability and effort, rather than one’s socio-economic background or wealth. Socio-economic status refers to a person’s or a group’s location in the social hierarchy, generally based on income, amount and type of education, and occupational level and prestige

(Boocock and Scott 2005, 148-9, 163-4). Nowadays, meritocracy is often referenced as a positive concept that should be aspired to in various aspects of society. There is a strong belief that institutions should be governed by people chosen on the basis of merit: education and ability, rather than factors such as wealth and social class. (Liu 2011, 385). Thus, in a meritocracy, social status becomes increasingly dependent upon an individual's level of education (Moore 2004).

Meritocracy based on educational attainment creates a “credential society” (Bell 1973, 414). In Kariya's viewpoint, the *gakureki shakai*, the credential society, is composed of two elements: on one side is schooling through which academic achievement and educational attainment are structured, and on the other is employment, where career attainment and advancement is based on the results of this educational sorting. He believes the credential society is responsible for generating the extreme academic pressure referred to as “examination hell,” or the severe competition among students to pass entrance examinations for prestigious schools and universities. Agreeing with scholars such as Field (1995) and Roesgaard (2006), Kariya also blames the credential society for a variety of social problems within regular schools, including bullying and school violence. Furthermore, he argues the credential society is also a contributing factor to the disruption of student's lives outside school, leading to student alienation and even suicide (Kariya 2011b, 89). Over the years Kariya increasingly focuses on the impact one's socio-economic background has on being successful in Japan's credential society. Since education is the key to socio-economic success and hard work is the key to education in a credential society, it is often thought that effort and hard work can overcome a compromised family cultural background (ibid, 110), but this is not the reality.

The Japanese educational system with its entrance examination culture has been described as a “huge sorting machine” that determines young people's eventual placement in adult careers (Fujita 1989, 128; Shields 1989, 101). In the 1980s, Rohlen already stated that

without a nationally standardized curriculum, entrance examinations of the Japanese kind would be neither fair nor really possible (1983, 95). According to article 4 from the Basic Act on Education, concerning equal opportunity in education (1): “citizens shall all be given equal opportunities to receive education according to their abilities, and shall not be subject to discrimination in education on account of race, creed, sex, social status, economic position, or family origin” (MEXT 2006). Here, it is clearly stated that factors such as social background and economic position should not be a reason a child does not get all the opportunities it legally deserves. Even though in Japan the law requires education to give each individual equal opportunities, this does not mean each child goes through the exact same progress in this “sorting machine.” There are for example different types of schools a child could go to, such as public and private schools, which can offer different types of education as long as they follow a somewhat standardized curriculum. Even in this standardized national curriculum for the compulsory years, not every child’s route is the same: we have seen that cram schooling in Japan is an educational business outside the realm of formal schooling.

One of the main functions of cram schools is to prepare students for entrance examinations for the next higher level of education. The cram school industry in Japan had an overall market size of around 93.6 billion yen in 2013², and has been stable over the past ten years (Mawer 2015, 131). Education expenses are a large part of most family budgets (Rohlen 1983, 107) and most Japanese students attend cram school at some time in their lives. Yet, not every student attends cram school. Maybe there is no need, because the child has no problems following the school curriculum and performs well on entrance examinations. Another possibility is the family not being able to afford cram school. Not having the means to pay for a prestigious cram school or private school will affect the social mobility: for the children of a lower socio-economic background it will be more difficult to break the cycle of not being able

² Around 700 million EUR, as of 2013.

to go to an elite university and having prestigious jobs, when they do not have the financial means to get the best preparation possible. Education is the key to social mobility (Hommerich 2017, 48), causing moving up the social ladder without money for the best education possible to be a challenge.

Another major factor in the inequality of opportunities in the Japanese education system lies in students' cultural capital. Cultural capital is described by Bourdieu and Passeron as “cultural goods transmitted by the family (...)” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, 30), where cultural goods are pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines et cetera.

“The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me (...) as a theoretical hypothesis that made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success, that is, the specific profits that children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between classes and fractions” (Bourdieu 2018, 79).

Here, Bourdieu states that the difference in cultural capital leads to unequal scholastic achievement. A way of measuring the cultural capital of children in Kariya's research on this, is by looking at factors such as: are they watching the news with their family, is there a computer in the house, was the student read books by its parents as a child, does the family take trips to the museum, among others. When the answer to such questions was often “yes,” the child is labeled “culturally rich,” if the answer was often “no,” then the student would be put in the category “culturally poor.” In his research, Kariya proved these factors significantly mattered when it came to the students' learning competencies, which made him conclude that not only the socio-economic background but also the cultural capital of a student makes a difference in

studying and passing entrance examinations. Since these learning competencies are distributed unequally and this unequal distribution is strongly influenced by a student's family background, background influences educational opportunities, according to Kariya (Kariya 2011b, 102-103, 106).

In the same line, Fujita's research on academic achievement by father's education showed that the higher a father's education is, the higher scholastic achievements tend to be for the children. He also added that graduates from higher quality universities achieve higher earnings (Fujita 1989, 133). Kikkawa confirmed in his research that socio-economic background and educational background influences one's years of education, and showed that educational opportunity depended on one's social background in Japan more than it did in the United States (Kikkawa 2004, 108, 113). More recent research from Kariya on parental background confirms these findings. His research proves that both parental education and occupations affect children's chances to access university education over the last decades. Children of highly educated parents and/or fathers in professional/managerial or clerical occupations are more likely to obtain a university's bachelor degree than others, for example blue-collar workers' children. He again concludes that socio-economic status and cultural background affect access to higher education, despite rapid expansion of higher education over the years. Even if economic obstacles in higher education are fully removed, other socio-cultural factors will still remain as a barrier (Kariya 2011a, 80, 90; Kariya 2011d, 253).

It is important to note that more than 20 percent of learning time of children in OECD countries takes place outside of school, in the form of homework, working with a tutor, or other activities. In Japan, where going to cram school is far from the exception, this might be even higher, since the proportion of Japanese students who attend after-school lessons at school, at home or at another venue is much larger than the OECD average: 70 percent compared to the OECD average of 38 percent. The OECD adds that "attitudes at home, including parental

support for education, involvement in children's learning and cultural habits like having books around, are also associated with stronger school performance," which is in line with the previous findings on cultural capital (OECD 2008, 5; OECD 2013, 8). Regardless, and astonishing enough, according to OECD, Japan does better than average in providing equitable learning opportunities to its students, regardless of their socio-economic status: about 10 percent of the variation in student performance in mathematics is attributed to difference in Japanese students' socio-economic status, while the OECD average is 15 percent (OECD 2013, 4).

It is remarkable that the situation is not changing, even though there is dissatisfaction. We have seen attempts at reforms, but unfortunately these led to even more inequality (Sato 2011, 18). Due to parent's distrust in the *yutori* reforms, many middle-class, urban parents worried that the reforms themselves would lower their children's academic achievements and thus future job prospects. This parental distrust is something that Kariya calls the "bright flight," where bright children of wealthier families fled from public secondary education to private six-year secondary schools, institutions where they are required to pay for tuition and pass selective entrance examinations (Kariya 2011d, 250). This is causing a shift in the examination war: now preparation starts even earlier, as early as primary school. Most top rank private secondary schools provide automatic access to affiliated high schools to students from their middle school program. Recognizing these advantages, many parents send their children to cram schools from the fourth year of elementary school in preparation of the middle school entrance examination. Both financial and cultural resources restrict who can participate in this new race, which now starts earlier than the previous examination war (Kariya 2011d, 262-263). Within this privatization, the difference of academic ability between children who go to cram school and those who do not has expanded, especially in the areas where private middle and high schools and prestigious cram schools are often found (Mimizuka 2006, 15). This is usually around the

bigger cities, which is also where the highest percentage of cram school attendance is found (Cummings 1979, 91). Not surprisingly, an increasingly large proportion of entrants to Japan's most prestigious universities are coming from private school backgrounds (Okada 2012, 126), affecting especially the younger generations, according to Kariya's research on accessibility of prestigious education in Japan over the past decades. Access to selective (elite) universities has become more severely affected by attendance at top rank private secondary schools, to which access is heavily influenced by socio-economic and cultural aspects of family background (Kariya 2011d, 261-262). The reason this circle of dissatisfaction with the system cannot easily be broken, can be found in the distrust of the parents. Even though the credential system has been widely critiqued by the Japanese people, the same people who felt a grudge against the credential society are hoping that their children would get a better deal out of it than they did themselves (Kariya 2011c, 115). Parents are not prepared to pull their children out of cram school until everyone else does (Cummings 1979, 105), afraid of their children missing out on the one-shot of educational success.

Another vicious circle would be the Japanese elite maintaining themselves. We have seen before that there is a strong belief that institutions should be governed by people chosen on the basis of merit rather than factors such as wealth and social class. (Liu 2011, 385). These people should consequently be the winners of Japan's examination war. After all these "winners" of the credential society, namely the graduates from prestigious universities, are highly likely to enjoy much better career chances (Kariya 2011b, 90). CEOs of big companies are often graduates of elite universities and the same goes for the people in the government (Rohlen 1983, 83, 88-89). Companies often hire new graduates from the same schools the employers had traditionally turned to, showing camaraderie between the newly graduates and alumni (Brinton 2011, 63), keeping the elitist system alive. The logic is that by maintaining an upper layer of selective and privileged institutions, the education system can maintain high standards in its

elite track (Kariya 2011d, 244). Government and business leaders make no secret of their belief in the efficiency of educational competition. The government continues to rely on Tokyo University as its principal supplier of higher-rank civil servants, for it feels the graduates of this school will be the most intelligent and disciplined (Cummings 1979, 105). There are various publications that tabulate the number of executives, politicians and bureaucrats by their graduating institutions on an annual basis. For example, in the ranking of CEOs among companies listed in the Tokyo Stock Exchange, 49 percent are graduates from the top five, and 63 percent are graduates from the top ten universities (out of over 600 universities) in Japan (Ono 2006, 273-274). The elite are confident that they are deserving of their reward, be it power, authority, status, and/or wealth, because it has been the product of their own talent and effort. There is a sense of entitlement among those who believe they have earned whatever rewards they have come to possess, like the acceptance into one's university of choice (Liu 2011, 384, 386). Why would they then change the system they believe in? Cave further says that, "concerns about elitism are justified, given the influential support for increased selection into elite and non-elite tracks within public education, though it is important to note that there is no immediate prospect of such changes" (Cave 2007, 25). In the end, cram schooling provides a better chance at winning the examination war. However, equal access remains a difficult factor, one that has not improved even after reforms, and socio-economic background still significantly affects the opportunities of success in Japan's educational system.

3.3 Introducing a Third Dimension: Insiders' Perspective on Cram Schooling

After the first dimension of cram schooling being too hard on the children attending cram school the and second dimension on the accessibility of cram schools and equal opportunities in education, follows the third dimension of the insiders' perspective on experiencing cram

schooling. It is important to showcase the insider's approach, to see if the opinions of those who live in the system match with the outsiders, those who write about it or take measures to reform it. How do the participants –Japanese cram school students and teachers– experience cram schooling?

According to Mawer's research on cram schools in the Osaka area, where she interviewed the representatives of six cram schools, insider approaches tend to offer predominantly positive images of the sector, compared to Japanese scholarly investigations and journalistic coverage (Mawer 2015, 134). Two decades before Mawer's research, Field made the same observation: "whenever I hear that children like going to cram schools, or at least, that they do not mind it, I am reminded of the tactful caution with which it is necessary to treat statements that, to an outsider at least, seem to be affirmations by the oppressed of their conditions of oppression. At any rate, the recent statistics are suggestive of how the bodies of children speak even when their tongues do not" (Field 1995, 55), referring to the physical reactions to the pressure put on the Japanese school children, such as hair loss.

Fact is, to many Japanese students, going to cram school is just simply their everyday reality, and sometimes the only way they will ever see their friends (ibid, 54). The in 2015 released movie "Flying Colors" (*Birigiyaru*) tells the story of the mediocre student Sayaka, starting cram school only in her last year of high school and making it into Keio University, one of Japan's most prestigious universities. This movie is based on a true story, written down by the mother of Sayaka, who supported her along the way as a true *kyōikumama*: an "education mom," a mother who supports her child's education no matter what (Rohlen 1983, 82). The English slogan of the movie is "Miracles can happen to you!" (*Birigiyaru "Flying Colors,"* 2015), a very romantic representation of cram schooling. By interviewing students and teachers of cram schools this study paints a much more honest representation of the reality.

4. Insiders' Perspective on Cram Schooling: an Analysis

4.1 Methodology

As presented in previous chapters, there are legitimate questions regarding the efficiency of cram schools as a tool to improve Japanese education. Not only because they create extra workload on the children, but also because cram schooling leads to unequal opportunities. The third dimension I want to add to the discussion is: how do the Japanese students themselves experience this. Are the participants aware of the unequal opportunity patterns, or do they agree with the workings of the system? Do they think cram school is too hard on the students? Do they think the Japanese education system can still function without these cram schools? Are cram schools necessary? Would abolishing cram school mean more free time and equality?

The importance here lies in understanding the situation not only from the side of the critics, but also from the side of those who went through this experience. Neuman states that qualitative researchers concentrate on ways to capture an inside view and provide a detailed account of how those being studied feel about and understand events (Neuman 2009, 185). Therefore, the qualitative method of interviewing was used for this research.

Seidman states that interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. The same could be said about people's thoughts and opinions. When people tell stories, they select details of their experience from their stream of consciousness. So, in order to tell a story, people reflect on their experience. In the process of selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and in doing so, making sense of them, telling stories becomes a meaning-making experience (Seidman 2005, 7-10), giving meaning to the experiences of the students who went to cram schools.

The conducted interviews were semi-constructed (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 124). I prepared two separate lists of questions for the participants: one for those who has experience with attending cram schools and one for those who have experience teaching at cram schools (see Appendix B and C). These lists were used as a guide, not a fixed script, in order to create a space where conversation could develop organically. This allowed participants to talk freely and go off-script which resulted in follow-up question and more in-depth stories.

All of the interviews were conducted in Japanese, the native language of the participants, which gave them the best opportunity to speak their mind. The interviews were all audio recorded. This gave me the opportunity to focus more on the person interviewed, on their body language, or to think of a follow-up question, instead of trying to keep up with taking notes. The interviews were all conducted, recorded, and transcribed to English by myself. When quoting participants, the English quote is used in this thesis, for readability purposes. Transcribing is an interpretative process (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 177), and often there is no single, correct translation for Japanese to English. In situations where the translation was multi-interpretable, I made the executive decision for the translation by myself. Since linguistic analysis is not relevant for this studies, I chose not to go with the verbatim, word-to-word style where all the “hm”s, emphasis in intonation and sighs are included, but a more formal, written style (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 181, 186) in my translations. Where relevant, I wrote down if there was a pause or a laugh in brackets: (.). Where needed in the translation, I added text in square brackets: [], for Japanese is a language with a lot of omission of pronouns (“he,” “she”) or the subject of the sentence (“I,” “cram school”).

4.2 Participants

Nine people with experiences of studying at cram schools and/or teaching at cram schools participated in this study by agreeing to a recorded interview. Of the participants, five were female and four were male. Additionally, two teachers let me observe and record their class in a cram school and were open to questions about their program and let me talk to their students. One of the teachers was female and the other male. The participants were selected through the snowball effect (Gemeten 2013, 621), in which one participant would refer me to their acquaintances. Sometimes, the ice was already broken before the interview even started, almost as if I was talking to a friend. Other interviews were very formal, with formal speech and having to keep a fine balance in trying to sense what could or could not be said or asked.

All the participants were aware these interviews were conducted for my thesis and that they were being recorded by an audio recorder, visible in sight during the interviews. All the participants had my contact information in case they had any questions afterwards or if they wanted to withdraw from the study. Besides the fact that I was responsible for collecting data in morally acceptable ways, including conducting the interviews properly, I was also responsible for ensuring the integrity of the identity of the participants. Therefore, all the participants were given pseudonyms and the names of the cram schools are left out. More in-depth descriptions of the participants, such as their background and how we met, can be found in Appendix A.

4.3 Results

First of all, I wanted to establish why the participants were going to cram school, or ask the teachers what they thought the purpose of cram schooling was. Haruna, an 18-year-old

university student working at the video-cram school she previously was a student at herself, starts off by telling she thinks cram school is “a place where everyone can achieve his or her goals for the future.” Going more into detail, she says: “at regular schools, you study the basic things (...) everyone should know. However, there are students who do not study diligently at school, or who sleep at school, who have to catch up. For them, there is [an element of] study support in cram schools.” Here, she implies that cram schooling is meant for those who cannot keep up with classes in regular school, one of the different types of cram schools touched upon before. However, she is the first of us two to bring up the university entrance examinations when I ask her if she thinks cram schools are supplementary to regular schools: “yes, I think [cram school] is a supplement to regular school. I went to this cram school myself as well, and there are times regular school was not sufficient for some particular knowledge. For example, in my cram school, there are classes where [teachers] say ‘this often comes up [in the entrance examination for] this [particular] university,’ and they do not teach that in regular schools.” Although careful at first, as the interview continues, her opinion on cram schooling being essential takes form:

Haruna: “I do think that you can say to a certain extent cram schools are essential. There are so many different kinds of cram schools nowadays, and there is a part where the classes in regular schools are just not sufficient anymore. I think that is our educational system now, and cram schools will add to regular education. I think they are important.”

Kirsten: “So regular school alone is not enough?”

Haruna: “Yes, that is true. [Regular school alone] is not enough” (laughs).

Here, it becomes clear Haruna thinks cram schooling is necessary in today's education system, because regular school alone does not provide sufficient preparation to get into a good university.

Yuichi, a 20-year-old university student working at various cram schools and with a history of being a *rōnin*, carefully agrees with Haruna's opinion that cram schools are necessary in the modern Japan's education system: "the function that cram schools have, might be necessary. However, I do believe we should change the cram schools as they are nowadays." When asking how, he says "how? Why don't we start with why? (...) I believe they should change cram schools so they have a better fit to modern times." He sees the current cram school industry as a service industry, with "the number one goal of cram school being passing the entrance examinations."

Kirsten: "Do you think the role of cram schools has changed in the past years?"

Yuichi: "I do not think it has changed. As I said, we are an industry who match the entrance examinations, a service-industry. The cram schools aimed at [passing] the entrance examinations have not changed."

Kirsten: "Those cram schools are aimed at [entering] good universities, right?"

Yuichi: "Of course. If not, then there would be no meaning to cram school."

Kirsten: "But aren't there also normal [level] universities [in Japan]?"

Yuichi: "Yes. However, the peculiarity of Japanese people is that they have this delusion that the people who go on [and study] at good universities are the elite, the smart ones, who can work [well]. Isn't there a list of the ratio [of students who get into good educational institutions]?" (Shows me a pamphlet from a cram school he teaches at) "Look, these are famous middle schools." (Shows how many applicants got in after

studying at this cram school). So if you get into one of these, your parents will praise you, and you want that, right?”

Kirsten: “Is getting into a good university in Japan a high priority?”

Yuichi: “Yes it is. Sometimes they even make TV-series [on this topic], showing that when you get into [an elite university], your social status will rise instantly. There is a book and even a movie called *Birigiyaru* on a really stupid girl who increased her *hensachi* score³ by 40, by going to a cram school for only one year, who then got into Keio [University]. That’s interesting, isn’t it? Her parents also released a book (laughs). [Her mother] is seen as the best mother [in Japan]. [This story] is typical for how Japan is.”

Yuichi not only confirms the main role of cram schools being passing entrance examinations, but also addresses the importance of social status gained from higher education and the pressure put on children by their parents to excel and enter an elite university.

23-Year-old and recent university graduate Naoya has spent a year studying in Germany, making him familiar with the German education system, which is similar to the Dutch education system I am familiar with. This resulted in us comparing the Dutch/German system to the Japanese one. Naoya believes that “in the education system that Japan has now, cram school is needed. But if the level of elementary school and middle school would be increased, then the cram schools aimed at [passing] entrance examinations would not be necessary.” When I then ask him if the Dutch/German system is better, with its different levels in secondary education and therefore absence of cram schools or entrance examinations, he replies he does not like systems of this kind. He thinks the segregation into different levels, taking place when children go to middle school, happens too early on: “I believe it is easy to adapt oneself to the environment

³ *Hensachi* is the standard score in regular school, designed to locate every child in the country along a bell curve based on standard deviation principles.

you were raised in. For example, I was a complete idiot when I was a child. (...) If Japan had the same system [as Germany], I would have gone to Realschule or Hauptschule⁴. I believe then [my growth] would have stopped there, that would be my maximum scholarly ability.” We then link this to cultural capital and social immobility: “It’s like a ceiling you can’t overcome. That would be really difficult, I think. But to humans... the timing of their motivation-switch to study is really different, isn’t it?” I then ask him about another aspect of the vicious circle of social immobility:

Kirsten: “But what if your parents graduated university, have a lot of money and can therefore send their child to a good cram school? And what if in another family, the parents did not go to university, and even though up to a certain point they are thinking of their children’s future, but they are not sending their children to cram school, because they do not have money: don’t you think that’s also like the vicious circle we just talked about?”

Naoya: “I think that’s just like [what we just talked about]. I think it’s a real problem that the child’s opportunities to grow stop because of the parents’ circumstances, also in Japan. A lot, in Japan. (...) However, if you increase the level of elementary school and middle school, it will become fair.”

Kirsten: “So you believe by raising the [difficulty] level, it [education] will become fair?”

Naoya: “I believe that in a way: if it [education] becomes fair, then you don’t have to go to cram school anymore, right? But then there probably will be a lot of elementary students who can’t keep up [with school].”

Kirsten: “Then they will fail [that grade of regular school].”

⁴ As opposed to Gymnasium, the highest level.

Naoya: “Yes, they will fail. And then, because they will, cram school will come into existence again, don’t you think? The follow-up kind of cram school [that helps children to improve their grades in regular school]. That [will be] another business. And if your parents have money, you can go there.”

Even though not against the system as-is, Naoya realizes there are elements of social immobility and inequality of opportunity in cram schooling. By elevating the level of regular schools, he thinks cram schools aimed at entrance examinations might cease to exist, but thinks this would then help cram schools aimed at children who cannot keep up with the higher pace in regular school into being. This would then only shift the problems of social immobility and inequality of opportunity from one type of cram school to another.

Participant Yuichi introduced me to “Free School,” a cram school with an unconventional concept, where not teaching facts but learning how to think is the main goal. Founder, CEO and teacher Takumi and teacher Misaki rotate giving workshops and provide assistance with questions. Takumi assures me that with their concept, “our cram school is totally different from traditional cram schools.” We were invited to come over and stayed for 4.5 hours, while the students had interactive math works and studied English, by talking to us visitors and later by doing their regular school homework.

Even though Free School and its teachers proclaim to be progressive, the young students seemed to think less unconventional:

Kirsten: “Do you think you should go to university?”

Student: “I think it is best to go to university.”

Misaki: “Why? There are many roads [in life].”

Student: “If you go to university, you have better chances at getting a job.”

After the students went home, Takumi, Misaki, Yuichi and I continue our talk on the concept of Free School of not cramming facts but gaining the ability to think:

Misaki: “not only do we think like this, the government is also [starting to] think like this. Japan is in a state where [economic] growth has stagnated. So, if people don't change, there will be no growth. There is also fewer children [birth rate decline], so if all of them don't grow, then Japan will be in a worse and worse [state]. That is why the government is also thinking, how can we change the people of Japan, how should we raise [the children]? [Up until now] the entrance examinations were all about cramming knowledge: if you have the knowledge you can succeed [in the examination war]. (...) [We from Free School think that] not cramming knowledge, but the ability to think, the ability to express et cetera: those [skills] are more important. The government is also [starting to] think that. That is why it has been decided that the entrance examinations for university will be changing in 2020. So the [children who are now] high school students [will be affected] by that change. Their parents are also wondering, what type of learning is the best way from now on? Up until now, there were only [knowledge] cramming-type of cram schools, but [cram schools] like our cram schools, which still only has a few students and is not a major cram school, will increase.

Here we see a positive shift away from cramming facts for entrance examinations, which are criticized for not being useful in everyday life, and towards creativity, and thinking for oneself. However, like Naoya's proposition of change, this would only mean change towards a different kind of cram schools. More cram schools like Free School would not solve the accessibility problem, the stress imposed on children or the scarcity of free time.

To get a deeper look into the awareness of unequal opportunity patterns and cram schooling taking up free time, we take a look at a few passages of the interview with Aoi. Aoi is an 18-year-old high school student who was about to graduate high school at the time of the interview and had already received the news she got accepted into Keio University by AO. She is the only participant who has had cram schooling throughout all of her education: the first two years of elementary school in the form of tests sent to her house, which were then sent back graded, followed by ten years of attending different cram schools. Aoi comes across very intelligent and confident, and tells me she often thought the pace at regular school was a bit too slow for her liking, and she enjoyed studying at cram school. She would go to cram school 4-5 times a week, while also being active in school clubs, resulting in cram school sessions sometimes until 9 pm during her elementary school years, and until 11 pm during her high school years. When asking if she thinks that is quite late for a child to still study, she repeats she had a good experience:

Aoi: “I’m not sure, but maybe a lot of foreigners think Japanese students are being forced to go to cram school and study really hard, and they feel bad for [the Japanese students]. Although there are people who are being forced to go, even though they don’t want to, there are also people like me and my friends: we really liked going to cram school and got to learn a lot, a lot of new things, it was interesting. Those people exist too. It’s not the case that everybody is forced to study really hard. That’s what I want people to know.”

In Aoi’s case her parents had the means to spend a lot of money on her education, and were very willing to do so. When asked if she thinks people with less money to spend on education have the same chances as she had, she initially says there are high schools where studying for

entrance examinations is integrated into the curriculum. While telling me this, she seems to change her opinion on this alone being enough to level out the opportunities:

Aoi: “If you don’t want to spend money on cram school, then you can go to a regular school where they do [the same as the cram schools]. But I think it’s hard to get into a [good] high school without going to cram school. So you have to go to cram school after all. If you don’t have money, I think you won’t get in. So then it would be unequal... To be honest I have never thought of these circumstances. From middle school I went to a private school, so I didn’t have to do an entrance examination for high school. There weren’t really people around me who didn’t have the money to go to cram school, so there is a part I don’t really know.”

It is clear Aoi had never considered the inequality of (cram school) accessibility as she had never been confronted with this issue before due to her high socio-economic background and surroundings.

Someone who has given inequality of accessibility due to a lower socio-economic background a thought, is 23-year-old recent university graduate Ran. She is a unique participant in the sense that she is the only half-Japanese participant, with her father being Chinese. This led to her education up to high school being at least partially in Chinese, at Chinese schools in Yokohama, south of Tokyo. When I ask her about her socio-economic background, she answers: “It was a bit different. I felt like the children around me were very rich.” Her parents’ divorce and her mother’s mental health issues caused Ran to drop out of cram school and even led to truancy at regular school. Eventually she got into a private university in Tokyo by AO, namely Rikkyō University.

Through video calls Ran taught English to Japanese high school students as a part-time job next to studying. These high school students were all temporarily residing overseas, and were all “rich kids (laughs). Rich kids for sure. Their parents are doctors and so. I think one of them [talked about] having a Ferrari, a very expensive car. Apparently [they are] rich kids.” Ran believes that in the Japanese education system as-is, the opportunities are not equal to everyone and that “it would be best to change the current [Japanese] education system. I believe that in today’s education system, [students] have to go to cram schools. I do not think that is right,” for not everyone can afford cram school. She later adds she likes the virtual cram school she teaches at, but “fundamentally I am against cram school. It creates a gap [between people]. I believe education should be equal to everyone. Therefore I am against cram schools, essentially.” When I tell her that her opinion is in line with a lot of literature on this topic, but that most participants had quite positive experiences with cram schooling and are thus pro-cram schooling, Ran points out to me that I might have spoken only to people from an above-average socio-economic background:

Ran: “What kind of people did you interview? Rikkyō University students?”

Kirsten: “Mostly students from Rikkyō University and-”

Ran: “I would say that Rikkyō University Students would think that [I am not surprised].”

Kirsten: “Because they are rich?”

Ran: “Because they are higher [on the social ladder] than the others. They are rich people. So of course they do not understand, because they are above this [socio-economic] gap.”

Kirsten: “So what you are saying is, Rikkyō University students are above this gap, causing them not to be able to see it?”

Ran: “They cannot see it. I really think so. Rikkyō University students are just rich, and they probably always [throughout their school years] went to cram school and got into Rikkyō University [because of that]. And because they graduated Rikkyō University, they can get into a good company and live a good life...”

It is obvious Ran has experienced first-hand that most of the people in a prestigious university are the “winners” of the examination war: the elite, who had all the cultural capital and financial means to get there, and who do not see the social issues such as social immobility.

The last interview of this study consists of four university students, aged 19 and 20 years old, who were interviewed simultaneously. All four were working part-time as cram school teachers at a cram school chain’s location in Chiba, east of Tokyo. The head of the school, was present in the same room working on his laptop while this interview took place. At the beginning of the interview, the participants talk as if they are reading from a brochure, telling me about how cram school helps you to work towards your dreams. The conversation then rather rapidly shifts to them telling me the actual goal is passing entrance examinations of elite universities, and that they think cram schools are needed to achieve this. Students come here seven days a week to study for those exams, and their parents are paying a lot for it (see Appendix A).

When I inquire about the socio-economic background of this cram school’s students, there is a long pause with many looks in the direction of the head of the school, who has stopped typing, and even side-eyed the participants, insinuating he is paying more attention than before. In the end, the answers I get are “they are not struggling financially” (Tarō, 20-year-old male), “we have students from both private and public schools here” (Sayaka, 20-year old female), and “actually, I think most of them are financially doing well, but not necessarily all of them” (Yuri, 19-year old female).

In this next passage, I asked what they would like to change about cram schooling.

Sayaka: “There is this economical side to it after all. Children who do want to go [to cram school] but cannot go definitely exist. (...) I think it would be really great if the chance [of going to cram school] could apply to everyone.

Akihiro (19-year old, male): “Well, I think that now the people who have a comfortable financial situation are the ones coming [to cram schools]. Their parents probably all went to university. Academic background of the parents is an important factor. So up to a certain point, if you do not have the academic background, you will not be recognized by the public. (...) I think it would be great if everyone could go to cram school.”

Yuri: “After all, there is this strong image now of cram school that it is expensive, that it cost [a lot of] money. (...) I think it would be better if we could get to the point [where] the children who think “I want to go [to cram school]” would actually be able to go, [and that] they could come here [to this cram school].”

Kirsten: “How would that change come into being?” (Pause) “For example, with support from the government?”

Tarō: “I think that the demand of an academic background is related to job hunting. Nowadays, people with a high academic background are preferred in recruiting [as new employees]. It would be nice if that system in corporations would change. People with a high academic background get a high income. Because their income is high, they can let [their children] go to cram school. So their children will also get a high academic background. That cycle [vicious circle] is there. If that employment system would change, [the system of] taking entrance examinations would also change. And I believe if entrance examinations would change, then cram schools would also change.”

Although both Sayaka and Yuri express that they would like equal access for every student, Tarō and Akihiro go a bit deeper, disclosing that the underlying problems of inequality of opportunity can be found in the importance of parental academic background, as well as in the recruiting system of Japanese employers, where one's diploma means everything. Once again, we see the vicious circle of social immobility, and definitely no gain in free time, at this cram school where children study seven days a week.

As indicated through these interviews, an inside look into cram schooling in Japan reveals that cram schooling is seen as a necessary tool to prepare for (university's) entrance examinations, answering the question of "do they think cram schooling is necessary?" with a "yes." None of participants expressed that they hated going to cram school, on the contrary: everyone except Ran told me about having friends in cram school, most of them told me cram school was a good environment to study at, and Aoi even really enjoyed going to cram school. From this study, it can thus be concluded the participants did not find cram school too hard. There were several proposals of how the Japanese education system would look like, in case cram schools were abolished, ("do they think the Japanese education system can still function without cram schools?"), which all came down to a shift from one type of cram school to another, like a cram school for students who cannot keep up in regular school, or a cram school like Free School. This also means abolishing the current cram school system would not create more free time nor equality. Most participants, like Naoya, Akihiro and Sayaka, recognized the importance of socio-economic background, the social immobility and unequal access to cram schools. However, it was also obvious that people at the top, like Aoi, do not see these inequalities, which are only visible by people who view themselves as lower than middle class, like Ran.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to understand the workings, uncover the outcomes and shed light on the insiders' experiences of cram schooling in Japan. Cram schools are an intertwined part of the Japanese education system, with the majority of Japanese students being enrolled in cram school at some time in their education. The seemingly necessary but in reality voluntary cram schools lead to several issues: one of them, referred to in this study as the first dimension, is the dimension of cram schooling causing a lot of stress for and pressure on the students, and depriving them from much-needed free time. The government's attempt to solve some of these issues by introducing the *yutori* reforms to create more free time, actually had quite the opposite effect: because the public trust in the Japanese education system was affected negatively, these reforms actually resulted in more emphasis on cram schooling, meaning no gain in free time.

The second dimension focused on the accessibility of cram schools, and brought the debate of inequality to this study. Since education is the key to socio-economic success, and hard work is the key to education in a credential society, it is often thought that effort and hard work can overcome a disadvantaged family cultural background, but we have seen this is not the reality. The belief that differences in cultural capital lead to unequal scholastic achievement (Bourdieu 2018) has been confirmed by researchers such as Kikkawa (2004) and Kariya (2011b), who showed that both cultural capital and one's socio-economic background significantly matter when it comes to students' learning competencies and years of education. Due to this social immobility, the "winners" of the examination war, namely the graduates from prestigious universities, are highly likely to enjoy much better career chances, and thus repeat the vicious circle of passing on their cultural capital to the future winners of the credential society: their own children.

The third dimension provided an inside look into the experiences of cram school students and teachers, in a search for an answer to the research question: “How do the participants of Japanese cram schooling experience the cram schooling system and do their opinions match the criticisms voiced by outsiders?” Insides relating to the first dimension of causing stress, loss of freedom, individuality, creativity and even going as far as leading to hair loss, bullying and suicide, were not confirmed by the participants. Field (1995) predicted cram school students to deny any dislike toward cram schooling, and right after the first rounds of interviews, I thought the participants might not want to open up to me as much as I would like them to. It is certainly possible that cram schooling might genuinely be a pleasant experience for many children. However, it is important to note that most of the participants in this study are in fact “winners,” who are “culturally rich” in their cultural capital and have a high socio-economic background, which created many opportunities for them. For a more extensive and holistic conclusion, further studies must include participants from different backgrounds, such as students from rural areas, students with parents without a university degree, or students who went to a hierarchically low university.

Insiders’ opinions on the second dimension, concerning the necessity of cram schooling, the importance of economic background, the social immobility and unequal access to cram schools, were more in unison with the existing academic literature. Even though there is an “elitist bubble,” where people from a good socio-economic background do not see their privileged starting position, most of the participants were aware of the unequal opportunities in Japan’s education system because of one’s background, enhanced by the importance of cram school. Abolishing or changing cram schooling according to the participants in this study would not lead to more free time, nor lower the importance of cram schooling, nor increase equality. This could indicate that cram schooling is merely a symptom of a larger issue of systematic inequality in the Japanese society. Once again, more research with a bigger variety of

participants is required to provide a more holistic view on the workings, the outcomes and the experiences of the insiders of Japan's cram schools.

Appendices

A: A Closer Look at the Participants

Haruna

At the time of the interview, female participant Haruna was an 18-year-old freshmen at a private university in Tokyo, called Rikkyō University. She worked at the cram school she herself went to before enrolling into university. This cram school is located in Kanagawa Prefecture, south of Tokyo, and teaches through video classes. The staff of the cram school therefore has a more supportive role as opposed to a teaching role. After the classes, the students of the cram school take a test, and then there is the opportunity to talk to the staff of the cram school, often university students, to go over the test results. This cram school also offers classes specifically tapered to pass the entrance examinations of elite universities, like Waseda University, Sophia University and MARCH: Meiji University, Aoyama University, Rikkyō University, Chūō University and Hōsei University.

Yuichi

Yuichi and I met while we took the same class on education at Rikkyō University. He was 20 years old at the time and very enthusiastic to introduce me to another participant, Aoi. He also arranged for me to observe a cram school class I will go into detail later on. Yuichi only taught for two years, but in various subjects and at three different cram schools in Tokyo, of the same cram school chain that can be found throughout the Kanto area in Japan. Yuichi stands out from the other participants, because he had been a *rōnin* for a full year before enrolling into the

university we met at. At the *yobikō* (cram school for *rōnin*), he took classes from 8:30 am until 3:30 pm, and then continued to study by himself until 10 pm every day. Because of his experiences, he has a lot of opinions on Japanese cram schools. One example for that which was also used in this study, is his believe cram schools are too old fashioned and should change their curriculum and teaching methods to fit modern times better.

Naoya

23-year-old Naoya is a bachelor graduate from Rikkyō University, with six years of experience in going to cram school: from the fourth grade of elementary school up to the last year of middle school, about six hours a week, spread out over two days. The cram school was located in his hometown of Yokohama, south of Tokyo, but can be found throughout the Kanto area. With both his parents being university graduates and his father being a pilot, the family never had to worry about money and this parents provided him and his two younger siblings all the extra schooling in cram schools they needed, so all three of them could get into so-called elite universities in Tokyo, where the parents rented an apartment for their children.

Free School

For this session I went to a slightly alternative cram school, “Free School” (not its real name), founded in 2013 and located in Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo, with a small amount of students attending, enrolled in both elementary and secondary school. The youngest student present was 10 years old, and the oldest was 16 years old. Since the children come from different schools in different areas and with different school club schedules, they each arrived at their own pace, and also were picked up at different times. There were at least five students present during the sessions,

but no more than ten at the same time. Yuichi introduced me to Free School. He thought I would be interested to see a more progressive cram school, which he was familiar with because he had been invited there before to give the students history workshops.

At Free School, they have two teaching methods, of which one is the more standard one, with using English or Math textbooks. The other method is more revolutionary and unique: instead of working with textbooks, the ideology of Free School is to let children think. “Why?” is what they keep asking the children. One of the exercises they made the children do while I was observing (and eventually, participating in as well), was to cut an A4 piece of paper in a way you thought it would take longest before it hit the floor. This was a part of their mathematics program: an engineering workshop. Another example of a workshop is: when children were studying Chinese characters, they went out in town together to find as many different characters as they could and later on they would design new characters themselves as well.

Simulating children to think outside of the box was something I did not expect to encounter while visiting a cram school. As I was present at the cram school session, for 4.5 hours with children coming and going at their own pace, the children had to study while I was observing. Therefore, there was no time available to keep the children off of their work to be interviewed by me. However, at the beginning we all sat down for introductions and I got a good idea of the workings of the cram school and what the children thought of it. The teachers decided me coming to Free School was also a good opportunity for the children to learn about the Netherlands, for which the teachers prepared a book with maps and pictures of Europe, and to practice their English with me. Then followed the Math workshop described above, followed by an hour of doing homework.

Later on, when all the children were picked up by their mothers, I got the chance to talk to the two teachers present a little more as well: founder and CEO of Free School Takumi, a

former consultant in his early thirties, and Misaki, in her late-twenties, who studied medicine in Kobe and joined Free School eight months prior to my visit. Both were very passionate about their teaching style, where they try to stimulate the children's creativity and thinking. Takumi was also particularly interested in the (originally German) Jenaplan schools in the Netherlands, which are a lot less rigid than Japanese schools and which highly value individuality and identity forming. Takumi and Misaki believe Japan is changing to a society where cramming merely knowledge for the sake of passing entrance examinations will not have the same importance as it does now: the ability to think for oneself will become more important. Therefore they think cram schools with a similar concept as theirs will increase in the coming years.

Aoi

Participant Yuichi also introduced me to Aoi, who I interviewed with him present. After she left I interviewed Yuichi himself. Aoi was 18 years old at the time of the interview. She was finishing up her last year of high school and already got herself a spot at Keio University, one of the so-called elite universities of Japan. It became apparent that Aoi comes from a family that deeply values education. Both of her parents are university graduates, with her mother working in the medical field, and her father working at the editorial department of a well-known newspaper. As their only child, they gave Aoi the best education they could provide for. Aoi went to cram school for ten full years, 4-5 times a week, 2-3 hours each session, from the third grade up until her last year of high school. The two years she did not go to cram school (first and second grade of elementary school) she got tests sent to her house to make by herself every month, which were then sent back to her graded, like a remote cram school. Aoi regularly

changed cram schools, some charging as much as 1.700.000 JPY⁵ a month, got into a prestigious middle school and then advanced to their high school and got into Keio via recommendation, also called “AO,” standing for Admission Office.

Ran

Even though Ran is a 23-year-old Yokohama native bachelor graduate from Rikkyō University like Naoya, her background is very different from his and the other Rikkyō students who were interviewed for these studies. Ran is half-Japanese and half-Chinese, and was enrolled in a Chinese elementary school where about half was taught in Chinese and half in Japanese. At the Chinese middle school she went to, the classes were increasingly taught in Japanese, because high school would be a regular Japanese high school for most of the Chinese school’s students. Ran was enrolled in cram school for about 1.5 years during middle school, before she dropped out. Ran openly spoke about how her parents got divorced at that time, and how she even quit regular school for a while, when she lived with her grandmother and her mother, who had mental health problems during those difficult times. By studying on her own, she got into a high school with an international branch, where there were more students with non- or half-Japanese backgrounds. Through Admission Office (AO), Ran got into Rikkyō University by passing an interview round and writing a motivation letter. These rounds take place before the Central examinations, which she therefore never had to take. Ran also works for a cram school by giving one-on-one video call lessons in English to Japanese nationals enrolled in high schools overseas.

⁵ Almost 1400 EUR, as of May 2019.

Tarō, Akihiro, Sayaka and Yuri

This interview was different from the others, as four cram school teachers were interviewed at the same time. The four participants consist of two males: Tarō aged 20 with two years of experience teaching at this school (remaining anonymous) and Akihiro aged 19, with one year experience, and two females: Sayaka aged 20 and 19-year-old Yuri both having one year teaching experience at this school. These four university students were all teaching at a cram school in Chiba, east of Tokyo. This is just one of their many locations, for this cram school chain can be found nationwide.

The four participants tell me one of the main differences with regular school is, that at their cram school, children have classes seven days a week, instead of five. Even though at the beginning of the interview, they talk about how cram school helps you to work towards your dream, the conversation quickly shifts to them telling me the actual goal is passing entrance examinations of elite universities. This is in line with the website of this cram school, where they advertise themselves as a cram school with a main focus on passing university entrance examinations. A banner counting down the days until the Center Test (the main university entrance examination) of 2020 is the first thing to catch my eye on their homepage. The four participants stated that most of the students come from a family background with two university graduated parents, who are “not struggling financially.” Price lists can be found on their website. Entree fee to the cram school itself is over 30.000 JPY⁶, annual tuition fee is over 75.000 JPY and then there are additional fees for tests and mock examinations, varying from 10.000 JPY to over 25.000 JPY per examination, and many different extra options, such as studying for the entrance examinations of a specific university, with prices such as over 35.000 JPY for five

⁶ 10.000 JPY is little over 80 EUR as of May 2019.

classes of 90 minutes, and the option to buy old entrance examinations for prices up to 100.000 JPY.

Remarkable is that I was not allowed to interview the male I knew personally, who introduced me to this cram school where he also taught. However, I did get to interview these four university students teaching at this cram school, who I did not know beforehand, under the conditions that I would give a presentation in Japanese of my personal experience with second language acquisition, in front of the dozens of university students who taught at this particular cram school. Another important note is, while interviewing these four participants, the head of the cram school was present in the same room. It was not appropriate for me to ask him to leave, so I take into account that the answers might have been self-censored. Oftentimes, the students looked at the principle for a reaction as they laughed nervously, and sometimes he would stop typing on his laptop, listening to the answers that his four staff members were giving me.

B: List of Possible Interview Questions for Cram School Students

Personal Information

1. Name (male/female):
2. Age:
3. Year in school:
4. Name cram school:
5. Years in cram school:
6. Hours in cram school on average per week:
- 7a. Where are you from (city, prefecture):
 - 7b. Location school (city, prefecture):
 - 7c. Location cram school (city, prefecture):
8. Commuting time
 - 8a. home – school:
 - 8b. school – cram school:
 - 8c. cram school – home:
9. Parent's educational background
 - 9a. Father:
 - 9b. Mother:
10. Social background (for example: profession parents):

Cram School Contents

- 1a. What kind of courses do you take in cram school?

- 1b. Is there a specific course you want to improve on you are taking at cram school?
- 2a. Are the contents of the courses you take at cram school difficult?
 - 2b. If so, are the classes more difficult than those of your regular school?
3. Do you think cram school is a supplement to school?
4. Do you consider cram school to be as important as your regular school?
5. How did you/your family choose the cram school you're going to?

Personal Experience

1. Do you enjoy cram school?
 - 2a. Are you encouraged to go to cram school?
 - 2b. Would you go if you were not told to go/supported?
3. Do you think cram school is needed?
- 4a. What is the goal of you going to cram school?
 - 4b. Is there a specific university you wish to enter, for which you are studying at cram school?
- 5a. Have you even taken an entrance examination?
 - 5b. If yes, to what level of school (for example: to enter high school)?

C: List of Possible Interview Questions for Cram School Teachers

Information Institution (Cram School)

1. (Name) M/F
2. Age:
3. Name cram school/website (will remain anonymous):
4. Cram school located in (city, prefecture):
5. Cram school founded in:
6. Approximate number of students:
7. Approximate number of students to one teacher:
8. Job description (for example principal/manager/administrative/full-time teacher/student teachers/etc.):
9. Teaching subject:
10. Years of teaching experience:

Cram School Contents

1. What is according to you the goal of cram school?
2. How is cram school different from regular school?
- 3a. Why did you choose to work at this cram school?
 - 3b. How does this cram school distinguish itself from other cram schools?
 - 3c. In case of experience at other cram school, any differences:
4. From which social background do you think most students studying at your cram school come from?

5a. Do you think cram school is a supplement to regular schools?

5.b Do you consider cram schools a necessity in contemporary Japanese education?

5c. Should every student go to a cram school?

6a. Do you think the role of cram schools has changed in the past years?

6b. Is technology (computers etc.) an important medium in teaching in cram schools these days?

7a. What is the relation between cram schools and entrance examinations?

7b. Do you think entrance examinations can be passed without cram school?

8. What do you think the students think of cram school?

9. Is there something you would like to change about cram school?

10. Have you been to cram school yourself? If yes, please elaborate.

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