Japan’s Educational System
*A Few Main Points and Recent Changes in the Educational System*

B.A. Essay
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Essay for BA in the Department of Japanese

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Abstract

Any educational system has its advantages and disadvantages; the Japanese system is one that aims for equality between its students. However this thesis will look at whether or not these statements are true, and see where the system is fair compared to where it is not.

Japanese education and efficiency has become more known in the last few decades. This essay aims to look at the Japanese educational system and it’s more recent changes. It will look at the educational reforms and see the cause for concern from critics.

The different levels of education vary from elementary school to university. Looking at the different levels of school, seeing where the pressure of academic success is most likely to happen.

Opportunities available for people of all ages and see when Japanese people hit the job market will be explored. It will look at the costs of education; see the inequality between children based on their parent’s economic background. These are things that might be clear to people who live in Japan, but as an outsider there may be some things that are new or interesting when it comes to how the Japanese educational system is structured.
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Introduction
Education has always held an important role in a society’s foundation. Now, having the opportunity to get an education is seen as a human birth right, as is the case in the first world countries at least. Schools are everywhere and compulsory basic education is meant to be available for everyone, regardless of their background.

When looking at any educational system, there will always be some controversy as to how the education system is structured. Therefore, there will always be room for improvement. There are differences between countries, cultures, and individuals that can influence which studying methods work and which do not. Not all students absorb information and study in the same manner. The Japanese educational system is often praised in the media for its high standards of education and gets attention from overseas. (Cave, 2001, p.173) The system is known to produce students who score very high in cross-national studies of academic achievement in both maths and science (lower scores in reading is believed to be due to complications due to having four different types of alphabets; the Roman alphabet, or Romaji, Kanji, Hiragana and Katakana). (Stevenson, 1991, p.116) Thus it seems that Japan has a high standard of education and that the system motivates their students to do well. However, when looking at the national rankings of Japanese universities, they conversely score rather low, and the students seem to suddenly score lower than the North American schools when looking at international rankings. (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/) This is a strange turn for an educational system that excels in the primary levels of education.

The Japanese educational system is constantly changing and trying to better itself, as would be the aim for most educational systems in the world. There are many positives to the system as well as a few negatives. In this thesis an attempt will be made to draw out what makes the Japanese Educational system special, how the cost of education becomes a factor at later stages as well as examining how cultural values inherent in the society influence the development of the system. Is there something that makes the Japanese educational system unique?
The Japanese School System and Attendance
Schools in Japan have existed since around mid A.D. 600’s. (Stevenson, 1991, p110) However, at first there was not much variety also the opportunity for commoners to go to school was not established until much later. During the start of the Edo period (1615-1868), new schools were established by the government of the Tokugawa. These were the hanko [判子] and gogaku [語学] schools made for the ruling class in Japan, which at that time was the warrior class, the samurai [侍], though some gogaku schools also accepted commoners as pupils, generally this was too prepare them for administrative work in the future on a behalf of the feudal clans. (Kawada, Levine, 2014, pp.42) These schools focused on in equal parts martial arts and literature. While for the lower classes, schools affiliated with local temples called terakoya [寺子屋], mainly taught how to read and write. The terakoya were usually not government funded and depended on the local citizens to exist. (Rubinger, 1982, pp.5) The terakoya schools accepted both boys and girls unlike the schools the samurai attended, and could be attended from the age of six or seven, and due to variations of schools they could be attended until the ages between ten and thirteen. (Kyobayashi, 1965, pp.293) The third types of schools established at this time were the shijuku [私塾]. These were private schools where teachers would teach from their own homes. They would often specialize in certain subjects such as calligraphy, Western learning and more. In the year 1887 censuses show that only 28% of Japanese population had attended school and almost 80% of the nation was illiterate. In 1909, compulsory state organized education was established for all Japanese children to attend six years of elementary school. As a result, 99% of the children enrolled in elementary schools (in 1910) were now literate, and the illiteracy rate had gone down rapidly. (Stevenson, 1991, p.110) The current Japanese educational system is based on the Fundamental Law of Education known in Japanese as Kyoiku Kihon ho [教育基本法], which was passed on the 31st of March 1947 while Japan was still under American occupation, and is based on a similar system in the United States. (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology, 2006) The Law introduced a nine year school system of compulsory school.
The school year in Japan starts in the beginning of April, unlike most of Europe and the United States where school starts between August and September. This is because the school start correlates with Japan’s fiscal year.¹ This time is commonly seen as a time for beginnings in Japan, so culturally it makes sense for them to commence the new year at the same time. (Chavez, 2005, p.296) It also correlates with the blooming of the famous cherry blossoms in Japan. Many campuses have cherry trees on their campus lots, making the campus beautiful for the first few days of school.

In Japan there are both private and public schools at all levels, and in general most public schools are co-educational whilst some private schools are gender specific. Even some universities are gender specific, although these are less common. (Sugimoto, 2010, p.124)

The compulsory school years are divided into 2 different educational levels. Elementary school (shogakko [小学校]), where the first year students start at the age of 6, lasts for 6 years and is then followed by 3 years in lower secondary school (chugakko [中学校]). After lower secondary school is no longer mandatory, however about 97% of Japanese student continue to higher secondary school (kotogakko [高等学校]), and almost all of these students graduate 3 years later. Strongly indicating that education in Japan is highly sought after and valued. The change has been marked as in 1950 only 42% of students advanced to upper secondary school. (Stevenson, 1991, p.111) Upper secondary school is often what is referred to as high school in the United States. This gives the Japanese high schools one of the highest graduating rates in the world, right after Denmark with its 96% high school graduation rate; Japan is at 93%, whilst the United States has a 72% graduation rate. ²

Once high school graduation has taken place there are a few paths one can take. There are four-year universities, two-year junior colleges, and special vocational schools for those who do not want to go or have the required funds for junior college or university. (Sugimoto, 2010, p.124) Vocational schools can be attended after high school and provide vocational education that is generally related to a future job that does not require a university degree. There are many different paths to take in a vocational school, such as engineering, social welfare, dress making or even agriculture. (Licence Academy co.) About 50% of high school graduates apply for four-year universities and only around 6% go to two year junior colleges.

¹ **Fiscal Year** is the period a company of government use for accounting and preparing financial statements. This period starts in April and finishes in March the next year.
² **High School Graduation Rates in Select OECD Countries (Data 360)**
Some university students’ even do both: go on the path of a four-year university, and then take additional vocational school classes outside of their university ones. This is to make their own curriculum vitae (CV) fuller and showing that they have learned more than their peers, which heightens the chances to get hired at a good company. (Sugimoto, 2010, p.124)

Graph 1.1 is based on aggregate data collected in the 2010 census publication. It shows the educational levels of people of different age groups in Japan. It showcases that the youngest age group (20-24) still has 30% of people currently working on their own education. When we look at the older age groups, we can see that less than 50% of the population has a high level of education. Although, that number is slowly rising, when compared to the older generations in large due to increased availability and decreasing costs.

**The Expense of Education**

Education in Japan, compared to most European countries, is expensive for parents; even including the compulsory years and public school, the prices can become quite steep. Both private and public schooling is somewhat expensive for families with children, though private education has always been more expensive than public.

The tables below show the average cost of education of each year throughout elementary, to the end of lower secondary school, found in a study made by the Japanese government in 2008. (Toyoda, 2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elementary school cost (yen)</th>
<th>public</th>
<th>private</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st grade</td>
<td>353,319</td>
<td>1,681,536</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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3 **Curriculum Vitae** is a biographical résumé of one’s career and training, as prepared by a person applying for a job.
As can be observed, these numbers are quite high, and it must be noted that they include the price of school lunches, tuition fees and extracurricular activities. The tuition fee does apply to both private and public schools. In the study the MEXT presented of the costs, it did not state whether or not the price of such things as school uniforms were included but it can be assumed to have been included. MEXT also estimated the cost of elementary school education when attending public school to be 1,845,467, which estimates at 307,577 yen to be spent each year. (Mext, 2009, fig 1-1-1) These costs can also vary a bit between schools, and private schools can even cost up to 2,000,000 yen a year.

After lower secondary school, there is a brief break from tuition fees and costs. On March the 31\textsuperscript{st} 2010, the Act on Free Tuition at Public High Schools and the High School Enrolment Support Fund was passed. However, the program does not cover the full cost of the tuition, but provides a fee for the students based on their family’s income, to ensure that they are able to enrol into high school. (MEXT, 2013)

Another big expense is the school uniforms. These come in different price ranges. Elementary school kids have more relaxed rules regarding these uniforms, and presently, elementary schoolers often do not have uniforms at all. However, all lower secondary schools and high schools have school uniforms. Each student must have a winter, and summer attire, as well as gym clothes. The price of these uniforms range considerably, with total costs being around 70,000 yen (Jo, 2013), and sometimes even over 130,000 yen. (Meitoku Gijuku Senior high school)

After school tutoring or cram schools known as \textit{juku} [塾] are common in Japan.
According to research about 26% of all children in elementary school and 58% of lower secondary school attend cram school once their regular school day has finished. (Sugimoto, 2010, p.132) These cram schools are notably more popular in areas with a higher density as in cities with a population over one hundred thousand, around 30% of sixth graders were enrolled in cram schools, whereas in cities with a population below 30,000, the percentage dropped to 15%. (Stevenson 1991, p.115)

Private universities have often affiliated themselves with particular high schools, elementary schools and even kindergartens. Attending these schools often gives the children a lift when it comes to academic advancements. When you attend an affiliated high school it means you are more likely to get accepted into that university, which in the case of prestigious schools is highly sought after due to both a higher chance of getting hired to a well payed job and having job security in the future. That is why some parents as early as kindergarten might choose to pay higher fees so that their children are more or less guaranteed a spot in more esteemed universities. (The Japanese educational system) Universities often have this information on their home websites, though many not in English as it is mostly intended for people who live in Japan, two examples of universities with affiliate schools are Shizuoka University\(^4\) and Waseda University\(^5\).

The aims of educational reforms
Educational reforms happen everywhere, and are a natural development in a society as curriculums need to be updated and changed in the same manner society and technology has changed. Educational reforms are not meant to be a bad thing, though sometimes events or changes in culture can be something that evokes the need for such change. The next under chapters will look at reasons for educational reforms as well as backlash that have happened when new things have been tried.

Causes for Educational reforms
The most recent educational reforms find their roots in the 1980s. These were the years when countries overseas started praising the Japanese efficiency and hard work, as well as often stating that Japan’s success stemmed from the good educational system present, especially the elementary school system. Yet despite this, parents, business leaders and politicians all voiced

\(^4\) http://www.shizuoka.ac.jp/english/shisetsu/fuzoku/
\(^5\) https://www.waseda.jp/top/en/about/work/organizations
concerns about weaknesses in the educational system and thus, the time for change came (Cave, 2007, p.14).

The push for educational reforms mainly started with the Japanese bubble economy inflating in the beginning of the 1980s, only to burst a few years later. This made many people lose their jobs, big companies went bankrupt and unemployment rates went up. People realised that a job for life was no guarantee anymore and the so called ‘Japanese business’ model was no longer ensured. Nevertheless, during the same time the economic hardship hit Japan, on January the 17th 1995, the Hanshin earthquake hit the Awaji area in the south, and struck the city of Kobe. Over 6000 people died, and over 40,000 were injured. The public was not only sad and upset about the damages the earthquake caused, but also angry over how long it took for the government to do react to the situation, both in sending in supplies and help for the people wounded. This made people worried about how trustworthy their government was. (Motani, 2002, p.315)

A few years later, in 1997, a 14 year old school boy was convicted of murdering another boy his age, as well as a younger girl, placing the head of the boy he murdered in front of the school gate of the victim’s school. He defended his own actions in a letter he sent to a local newspaper. (Lev, 1997) He claimed he was a victim as well, because he had been forced into the Japanese educational system, and therefore his actions were justified. This was not the only event that prompted for change, but a part in a series of events where people would rebel against society. Eventually, it was referenced in a report by the Prime Minister’s Commission on changes to be made in the twenty first century. This report was titled “The frontier within: individual empowerment and better governance in the new millennium”. (Motani, 2002, p.314-215)

Problems, Solutions and Backlash

The conventional Japanese education system . . . has forced ‘mass-production’ educational methods . . . on children or people who by nature have diverse personalities and abilities and grow differently. . . . At the level of elementary and early secondary education, the scholastic ability of Japanese children is reportedly high with regard to international standards. Their ability to think and create, however, is open to question. (Japanese Teachers’ Union, 1995:2-3) (Stevenson, 1991, p.15)

One of the consequences of the reforms was that children did not have as much free time to play and interact with other children as before, causing increased stress levels to build up from a young age. In the past, children would go out and play with each other and learn
valuable social skills from parents, grandparents and neighbours. Nowadays, however, the time that would be spent having fun is spent studying, and when they do have free time, it often goes to TV or video games rather than going outside and socializing with other children. (Cave, 2001, p.175-176) This could be the cause of many children developing an anti-social and asocial behavioural pattern. The expression of the lack of social skills has presented itself in different manners over time: violence in schools during the 1980s, bullying throughout the mid-1980s till the late 1990s, and the social withdrawal phenomena starting in late 1990s, also known in Japan as hikikomori, where children decide not to go to school for longer durations of time and are secluded in their own homes. (Cave, 2007, p.15)

New words in Japanese meaning examination hell (juken jigoku [受験地獄]) and school failure (taigaku [退学]) have come to be used more frequently with the added stress and focus on students’ academic achievements and more people are dropping out of school than ever before. Business organisations and business-related commentators have suggested that in order to solve this problem, adding more diversity into the education system could increase the interest in school subjects for students. Giving them a chance to choose what they want to learn and have it fit their individual needs could be what the educational system needs. Hitotsubashi University economist Iwao Nakatani claims that the Japanese educational system discourages competition and initiative from its students. This hinders the students that excel at education from meeting their fullest potential as the school system holds them back (Cave, 2001, 176-177).

Bullying exists everywhere in some shape or form. Though it has become a rather big issue in Japan. Bullying or ijime [苛め] as it is called in Japanese, in schools started increasing in the 1980s as well, and has become a big problem. Typical Japanese school bullying would include humiliating, tormenting, and to either or both physically and verbally abuse another student psychologically much more often than physically. Some cases of ijime are extreme; instead of small groups of bullying one student, it can be a whole class participating in the bullying, sometimes even the teacher takes part. (Sugimoto, 2010, p.146-147) One of the major negative effects of the ijime, is that students see no other way out other than ending their own lives, which has become a big problem in Japanese society, and regularly there are news coverages about student suicides as results of ijime (Akiba, Shimizu and Zhuang, 2010, p.369).

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology
MEXT published in 2014 a report indicating that *ijime* is increasing. Cases of serious school bullying went from below having always been below ten thousand in 1997, to increase to the high number of 185,800 in 2014, it seems the numbers can be very different each year, but the years that big bullying cases get reported media the reported bullying cases seem to increase. (Reported Cases of…, 2014) One of the reasons for the increase can however be explained by cases having gone unreported in the previous years. In July of 2015, a student by the name Ryo Muramatsu ended his life after documenting his experience with *ijime* in a diary. He was open about it to his homeroom teacher and showed him his diary where he documented his feelings for over a year. Despite this, the teacher decided to ignore it and not report the case (Quian, 2015). This is one of the reasons why *ijime* is a hard problem to face in schools, and often reports about the subject is likely not the right number (Akiba, et al, 2010, p.370).

The suggested ways to deal with *ijime* once it occurs is to notify the homeroom teacher. This is because Japanese teachers are a respected authority and the children are expected to listen to what a teacher says. It is normal that the teacher discusses the occurrence by making a class discussion. They will work together to try and find a solution to the problem and put a stop to it together as a group. However, if the group discussion yields no fixing of the *ijime* and it continues afterwards, the teacher will tell the Student Guidance Committee about the problem. The Student Guidance Committee is a group with other homeroom teachers and a Student Guidance chairman. Together they discuss the problem and try to see if they can come to a solution. They will usually try to keep an extra eye on the students who are bullying others during the time they are on campus. Nevertheless ultimately solving the problem rests squarely in the hands of the already overworked homeroom teacher (Akiba et al., 2010, p.372). As seen in the case of Ryo Muramatsu, the teacher failed to react appropriately.

In the 20th century, MEXT introduced the so-called “Reduced Intensity Reforms”. These were changes meant to try and lower the stress and pressure on students. The first change was in the 1970s and was to reduce the amount of materials teachers had to cover in classes, because critical thinking was to be given more import than memorization. This didn’t go through until the late 1980s, implemented in 1989, and then additional changes were added in 2002, thus leading the curriculum to have a 30% reduction, though the cuts vary from different subjects and grades. One of these changes was to take away classes on Saturdays, thus reducing a previously six day school week to five days. (Cave, 2001, p.178-179) The Reduced Intensity Reform was met with some opposing maths and science scholars who
claimed that the reform was making the university level students’ academic achievements decline, and that the curriculum change was watering down the whole system. MEXT however argued that there were never any proofs to substantiate these claims. (Bjork, Tsuneyoshi, 2005, p.622)

One of the changes implemented was the addition of a subject named Integrated Learning. Unlike normal subjects, integrated learning only has a short description on how it should be taught, and gives the teachers freedom to decide what happens in these classes. It also makes it very different from school to school, based on what the teachers want to do. All other classes usually have a strict set of rules that teachers have to fulfil, and keep the schedule tight. (Cave, 2001, p.178-179) Integrated Studies focuses on the children; making them learn how to solve problems and enjoy studying is its main focal point. This class also does not require any books, making it possible for teachers to find a new approach to teaching (Motani, 2005, p.310)

The five day school week received a number of complaints from parents who claimed they lost valuable work time because their children needed to be taken care of at home during the weekends, and many argued that they would rather have school on Saturdays. One day less at school also increases the pressure on parents to put their children into cram schools, which is not something everyone can afford, and results in a bigger gap between the students based on their parent’s financial background. (Richardson, 2005) Schools in Japan also have some very strict rules, and some of these are in a violation of human rights. A study published in 1985 made by the Japan Bar Association (JBA), analysed school rules from 985 lower secondary schools and schools and found that they were breaking human right rules such as; the freedom of happiness, freedom of expression, the right to own or hold property, the right to not be searched. (Tamura, 2004, p.53) Some of these rules were ones related to school uniforms, for example, the students being prohibited to wear accessories, or to bring watches or snacks on to the school grounds. The school uniforms often make children feel like they are being robbed of their individuality, and they usually do not think of this as a violation of their rights, but rather think that the rules are inconvenient, and stop them from expressing themselves. (Tamura, 2004, p. 54-55).

“I think it is inevitable that teenagers want to rebel against something. School Rules become a wall for them to challenge. Lenient rules do not present any challenge for them, so they will try something worst. I think it’s better to set the rules at a strict level, so that students can be disciplined before they engage in more serious conduct.” (Interview, 1998)(Tamura, 2004, p.57)
It seems that the strict rules make it easy to see when a student starts to deviate from them, for it often means there might be something going on in their daily life outside of school. That makes them want to rebel which means these problems can be anything from small problems at home, parents getting divorced, or possibly a loss of a family member or friend. This alerts the teachers and gives them an opportunity to talk to the student face-to-face and see if they have something to say about why they are breaking the rules. Other arguments that can be made are that a workplace has rules, and school is merely preparing the students to be accustomed to having to look a certain way and behave in a certain manner in a workplace. Furthermore, it makes everyone in the school seem equal, whereas one’s economic status cannot be seen when everyone is wearing the same uniform.

**Japan and Individuality**

In 1947, during the restructuring of the school systems following Japan’s defeat in the Second World War a new set of educational goals were set alongside changes in format.

> “Full development of the personality, the nurture of a healthy people, sound in mind and body, who will love truth and justice, esteem individuality, respect labor, have a deep sense of responsibility and be imbued with the spirit of independence, capable of building a peaceful state and society” (Japan National Tourist Organization, 1975 p.187).

The part about individuality was re-emphasized later on in the document as well. The Japanese word for individuality used in the reports is *kosei* [個性] which has created a linguistic debate in Japan due to the meaning being considerably more complicated in Japanese than in English. Some critics claim that the use of the word ‘individuality’ like the government uses it, is not the true meaning of individuality, that it is a way to introduce neoliberal market principles to the education system. Author Masao Hamabayashi claimed the current use of the term individuality by the government was to sort children according to their abilities and put them in groups. He said that true individuality would be to let the children do and learn as they wanted, and they should be able to use all their abilities when learning as children’s potential is not limited to just one thing (Cave, 2007, p. 24).

Another author by the name Hidenori Fujita also argued that there were three ways to interpret the word: ‘different groups of people are separated from each other socially, culturally, and sometimes, even spatially’, ‘all individuals are assumed as being equal, autonomous and independent, but at the same time, as having an orientation to accept different people, ideas and cultures, and to cooperate for improving their welfare’ and ‘individuals tend to be self-oriented, concerned with personal benefits, indifferent towards
others, and not willing to cooperate in order to improve social benefits’ (Cave, 2007, p.25). There are examples of the word ‘individuality’ being a cause of debates in education for a long time and it seems that in Japanese, the meaning is not clear. The lack of a clear meaning behind the word used in the government’s documents therefore seems to be the root of arguments, and causes confusion about what the government is really trying to achieve.

**Militaristic hierarchy**

The Japanese school system has a hierarchy between both students and the teacher. This type of hierarchy is something seen all over in the Japanese society, both in the workplace, and at home. The teachers have the highest status, and have the title *sensei* [先生], which means teacher. This suffix is usually added to the end of their last names, as using a person’s first name in Japan would indicate that you are good friends, and even when a student and teacher is close they are not friends in the same manner as two students in the same year are friends. The younger students call the older students *senpai* [先輩], while the older students call the younger students *kouhai* [後輩]. This is used even when there is only one year between the students. They will also use formal language to those ‘above’ them in rank, and to strangers. The hierarchy is not only confined to the school grounds, so when a *kouhai* meets a *senpai* outside of school they are expected to bow to them when they greet each other, if they do not it is seen as disrespectful. This system also applies to the after school club activities they take part in, and the first year students are usually expected to clean and wash the equipment and tidy up for the older members, and often are not even allowed to take part until they are a second year student. (Sugimoto, 2010, p.141-142)

As stated earlier, in Japanese secondary schools it is most often a rule to wear a school uniform. These can differ in design and colour depending on the schools and one of the most common type in middle school is the sailor uniform. The uniforms often come with strict rules about how a student’s hair should be worn: some schools require boys to have short cropped hair and girls to have short bobs, while there are often even rules on what colour socks are allowed, as well as the length, and the style and colours of shoes. Historically you could also spot what year a female student was in based on her hairstyle. Some of the uniforms are in designs made before the Second World War and look very outdated (Tamura, 2004, p.55).
When class starts it is normal for the classroom leader (this is usually a student) to shout the commands; stand up (kiritsu [起立]), bow (rei [礼]) and sit down (chakuseki [着席]), these commands are used in all levels of schooling up until university. This is how students greet the teachers at the beginning of each class. Emphasis is placed on uniformity, and they will often read together in class, not one student at a time, but all the students simultaneously. It is also common for schools to have a special school song that is sung by all students at morning assemblies, sporting events, and other times, encouraging the students to feel like they belong to a group (Sugimoto, 2010, p. 142-143).

**Teachers and Teaching Methods**

Being a teacher in Japan brings with it societal respect. It is also a safe job to choose for a stable income and a currently has a guaranteed job safety, making it a job few people choose to leave, and a job many wish to have. To be able to apply, one must have undergraduate degree in teaching or have attended a special prefectural teachers college, though these usually apply only to the elementary school teachers. This also means that becoming a teacher can be competitive, but it does usually differ from prefecture to prefecture. In the prefectures where the number of people qualified as teachers succeeds the numbers of jobs available they have made a competitive examination process where only the people who score highest get the opportunity to work in the prefecture. (Stevenson, 1992, p. 114) Even with the good benefits of being a teacher it comes with some responsibility, such as checking up on pupils in the case of them being absent, but this is the kind of togetherness the school wants, and if a teacher encounters more than one student being absent, making home visits and learning about the situation can help a teacher deal with the situation better in the future. (Tsuneyoshi, 2013)

Elementary school teachers all have their own desks in a teacher room; the desks are usually arranged by grade levels (Lewis, 2000, p.4-6). The teacher room helps the teachers to have an opportunity to talk to other teachers. More experienced teachers will often consult with newer, more inexperienced teachers, and helping out other teachers with their lessons is normal. The room usually has a reference book and teaching materials that can help in teaching a class. This helps bring the teachers together, though it also means the younger teachers are under constant observation. (Stevenson, 1991, p. 114)

Teachers in Japan work together on teaching in more ways than just by helping each other out during their free period. There is a method to teaching in Japan called *kenkyuu*
jugyou [研究授業] which translates to research lessons, or a lesson study in English. This method has existed in Japan for more than 100 years and is a method for teachers to learn how to become better at their job. (Alvine, 2007) There are different ways the studies are done, but it is in principle a classroom lesson with students.

These lesson studies however are always observed by other teachers whilst previous research on how the lesson is executed is done previously, and usually planned by a group of educators for an extended time. It is designed to make a lesson interesting and for it to have a clear goal when it comes to education. Often the lesson study is done by a whole faculty of teachers in a group working together. These lessons are most often recorded, either with a camera, voice recorder or by making observational notes and taking copies of what the students ended up with on their papers. Afterwards, the lesson study is presented by the teachers who planned the lesson study and the results are discussed. Sometimes the presentations have outside researchers or educators come to listen and give their thoughts on the performance. These lessons can be done in any subject, even in class meetings or for the whole school to do activities together to encourage student bonding (Lewis, 2009, p.4-6).

The Different Levels of Schools
All levels of education differ a bit from each other. This is also true for each grade a student is in, as the difficulty of classes change from year to year. The way the Japanese society influences children to be more independent while also working together will be looked at, while seeing the sudden shift as people reach the university levels.

Elementary School
The goal of a student during elementary school is to become the following; to always do their best (ganbaru [頑張る]), kind-hearted (yasashii [優しい]), strong and healthy (jobu na [丈夫な]) and diligent in studying (susunde benkyo [進んで勉強]). The goal is for the students to become a “whole” person. This means that they will be kind hearted, with a strong healthy body, a curious mind and able to learn and see how their own strengths can help others. At this level they do not focus on academic achievements as much as the higher levels of education. In elementary school, there are no exams or tests, and all children advance to the next grade without having to pass any sort of exams. This is the same for lower secondary school; the focus is more about giving a big effort and working hard, while not focusing on the different learning speeds of the children, so that everyone is supposed to feel included (Stevenson, 1991, p.112-113)
Japanese elementary school will allow up to 45 students to be together in a class with one teacher, even though the general average of children ranges around 33. The class division is done at random, only making sure there are about the same number of girls as there are boys. The class stays together from the beginning of elementary school until the end of it keeping the same teacher for 2 to 3 years at a time, and making it so that the children get to know each other well (Stevenson, 1991, p. 111) Generally, children enter the school that is located closest to their home (Stevenson, 1991, p112-113).

In elementary school they form groups called *han*, where the children who have an easier time learning things are put with children who have a harder time learning, and they do activities and study together. This is done to try and teach the children what it feels like to be a member of a group and to feel included (Stevenson, 1991, p112-113). At the end of a school day, the children clean the school before they do their extracurricular activities. Most of the cleaning of the school ground is actually done by the students themselves, under the supervision of teachers. This is also done in the higher levels such as lower secondary school and in the high schools, it’s often a *han* group who has the responsibility to clean each time.

The teaching methods are different from the higher educational levels and the teacher does not use a lot time on doing lectures. Instead, the teacher starts by telling the children what they will learn, and then goes through that the material, he or she questions the students and summarises what they learned in class that day. Ideally the teacher wants to encourage the children to think on their own and try to understand the subject they are learning by thinking and seeing how the other students think. The teacher does this by asking for example a question about maths, and asks each student to figure out the answer, without giving them much information, having taught them the formula before-hand. After this, the teacher asks each student about their answer, and if a student seems to be struggling with a question the teacher will explain further. If the students seem to already understand how the maths problem is solved and have logical explanations as to why, the teacher moves on. (Stevenson, 1991, p117)

**Middle School**

When kids enter middle school, the curriculum and teachers become more specialized than in the elementary level. They however are not as academic as the higher levels of education and still have classes with activities. Some of these classes are music, art and sports. They have field trips, homeroom time and are able to attend clubs. This is a continuation of making the
student a ‘whole’ person, and just like in elementary school, the goal is the same. (Fukuzawa, 1994)

However, even during the time they are supposed to learn to be themselves and be one person, by the 9th year of middle school, students will have to decide what kind of high school they will try to attend. They have the two choices: a high school to find work after, or find a high school that helps them get into university later. The media usually reports on top-ranked Japanese high schools, which informs students where it would be best to apply. The high ranked high schools have a good success rate in getting student into good universities, and are also ranked in a similar manner. Whilst the competition between middle schoolers who want to get into a prestigious high school increases, the students who do not plan on going to university after will not need to focus as much on their academic ability, and thus get left out of that competition. It is in the end only concluded by academic achievement, and not based on the personalities of the students or their ideas for their own futures (Ono, 2001, p.162-163).

Teachers at middle schools will usually not push the students with lower academic achievements to try and outdo themselves, but instead they get no sort of encouragement. This is supposed to make the student accept that they are not going to manage to do what they might have originally thought, and instead they accept that they are not going to make it earlier on. This is also done to minimise the number of children who do proceed to high school and end up failing university entrance exams at the end of high school. (Ono, 2001, pp.163)

High School
When it comes to high schools, the pressures on students from student varies just like it does in middle school, seeing as only about half the students who attend high school plan to advance to universities. Others will go to aforementioned vocational schools, and some will enter into the job market. This is the final hurdle for a lot of students.

The pressure on the students who are planning on going to university can be rather high, and if they fail the entrance exam to the university they want to go to they will have to use a whole year in order to prepare to take them again and hope they get accepted the second time around. These students who fail become something called ronin, the masterless samurai as similarly to the masterless samurai, they do not belong to any high school or university, which to Japan as a society means they are almost seen as outcasts in society. (Sugimoto, 2010, p.127) The percentage number of high schoolers that end up as ronin is at 5%, and they often end up preparing in cram schools with students who are still in high school. After the
entrance exams are taken again, and if they pass the second time, it’s time to enter the university levels.

4 Year Universities
In the 1980s when the Japanese elementary and secondary education was praised, the Japanese universities were not seen in the same light but were rather criticised for poor quality. (Teichler, 1997, p.282) In the 2015 national rankings, only two Japanese universities were in the top 100 National Ranked Schools: Tokyo University ranked 23rd and Kyoto University ranked 59th. In comparison, Germany, a nation smaller than Japan, had 5 schools in the ranking, and South Korea, with less than half the population of Japan, ended up with 3 schools in the top 100s. Part of the reasons as to why the school quality goes down after high school might be linked to cultural and traditional reasons.

In Japan, having passed the entrance examinations for the school is the biggest hurdle, once you are in, it is relatively easy to stay in. When you are accepted into a university, it is almost like you are under their protection; they want you to do well (Bedford, 1957, p.331). It must however also be mentioned, that not all schools rely solely on the results of an entrance exam, some (usually less prestigious) universities will take recommendations from teachers at high schools and interview selected students, relieving them of the burden of taking the entrance exam and having to pass it (Teichler, 1997, p.281).

There’s a saying “you can only play while you are still in university” (asobu no wa daigaku no uchi [遊ぶのは大学のうち]). Many Japanese students see that for the next 4 years, this is the only time they have before starting a full time job and it is time to take it a little easy. In Japanese high schools, even the things you do outside of the school property, such as partying or going to concerts also reflects upon your school, doing things that are seen as inappropriate at school can actually get you expelled. They do not have to go to every class, often they are living on their own for the first time and rebelling a little can be very tempting. This, and the often large classes, makes skipping easy especially if no attendance is taken, and often the whole grade of a subject can be passed doing well on an end of the year exam. They often use multiple choice answers and filling in the missing words in a text to make it easier for the teachers to correct the papers and grade all the papers in the time given. (Austin, 2012)

Another reason for university students to slack is that the firms that they will apply for when looking for a job will often look more at the school’s ranking rather than at their grades and many Japanese university students usually look for jobs in the last year of their studies.
This makes the status of the university a student attends more important than their other achievements in life. Some large companies with good benefits and pay will only look for employees in the most prestigious of universities. This means that, for some students, working hard will not affect the chances of getting a job. (Teichler, 1997, p.288)

A study conducted by the University of Tokyo’s Centre for Research on University Management and Policy in 2007, estimated that around 9.7% of university students studied for less than an hour a week. This, compared to universities in the United States, only had a mere 0.3% of students studying for such a short amount of time (Osaki, 2012). Even though 9.7% is a high number, it does not mean that all university students are slacking; it also depends on the university and the subjects a student is taking. However, it can be a concern for the future of Japan and its competitive edge.

As mentioned, the firms who hire newly graduated students often check the school over the qualifications of the student. This is because Japanese universities help their students get a job. This phenomenon is called *shukatsu* [就活] or *shushoku katsudou* [就職活動] and means job hunting. This process does not occur after students have graduated, but instead by the end of their 3rd year or the start of their 4th year, usually around New Year. They go to a career centre at their universities, where they can find out about job seminars that they will be able to attend. In the start of the year the students have to fill out entry sheets asking for their reasons on why they want a job. This entry sheet’s averaged at around 46.9 entries for job applications per student in a survey made in 2012 by DISCO. After the process of filling out the entry sheets, they will get the opportunity to take tests and get interviewed by companies. Students will often apply to many jobs and might not end up with one that is good for their personal interests (Amin, 2012). The more prestigious schools often have a good bond with well paid and known firms, so lower ranked universities can often not promise jobs of the same quality, and may even have a lower rate in successful employment after university. (Sugimoto, 2010, p.135) The reason this is important is because graduate students will usually start looking for jobs in their last year at the university, often the parents are involved in this as well, and they usually aim for getting a job straight out of university.

For students who are still confused about which jobs or directions to take in life, there are often teachers who will fill the role of a counsellor. Japanese universities have something known as *gashuku zemi* [学習ゼミ], these are seminars held outside of campus, and can often be weekend trips including dining and doing other activities not normally done during regular classes. These seminars are held to evoke a strong bond between teachers and students at the
higher level, as classes can be much bigger in university and having a strong bond with a teacher in a regular class is not as easy. The seminars are usually courses that go on for a year, with a smaller number of students attending. The seminars are held to learn something of academic value and to prompt student discussion rather than actual lectures. The professors holding these seminars are a sort of replacement of the student counselling; they can both help students figure out what they want and try to help them find a jobs or places they can apply to when they graduate. The seminars are often what students remember the most about college courses in Japan.

However, there are differences among the professors in capability to consult or help the students making the seminar experience different from class to class. While some may bond with their professor for life, others will not have as much to remember from these times. This is because every professor is obligated to hold one of these seminars every year, and some professors are more invested in it than others are. (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2005) This marks the last steps of education in Japan before the working life, and graduating seems to be a bittersweet feeling for many students.
Conclusion
In conclusion, we can see that there is a big focus on academic achievement and that the system seems to largely ignore the qualities of students after they have reached middle school level of education. Even if during elementary school, the system tries to focus on the children and teaching them to be together, and the aim is to like learning and to form connections with each other and act as a group rather than focus on an individual. This can be seen as both a good and a negative thing, as in each child might not always get to grow to their full potential, but children in difficulty on the flipside get to feel more included and learn in a safe environment.

When it shifts from elementary to middle school, the pressure on certain students increases by a large margin, making school more of a chore than fun and play like in elementary school. This might be a cause of problems when it comes to education. The focus on the future of a child at such a young age could be problematic and the cramming of knowledge could also hinder their abilities, and more often than not it may be their parents who call the shots and the children have no say in it. There is no longer a focus on understanding how things work, but rather on memorisation and being able to repeat the things that have been learned.

High school is a critical time for many students, getting into their university of choice is something they strive hard for and studying for their entrance exams often seems to be more important than being social in other ways. When accepted into university, they have, for the most part, made it. The university helps the students get jobs and desire for them to make it in life. Higher ranked universities guarantee higher paying jobs. This of course only applies to the students who managed to score high enough points to be accepted.

The whole system does not create an equal opportunity for everyone, which seems to be a problem the government is trying to fix, though not without some hickups. The system works on money, the parents who have good jobs and higher incomes manage to send their children to better schools and can guarantee a better life for their children from an earlier stage. This also means certain parents might struggle to help their children as they cannot afford things like the cram schools or private schools, This makes it harder for the students with less well-off parents to keep up with the competition and creates a bigger gap between students.

There are also some social problems with the educational system, and it seems to be difficult to figure out a solution to the problem, as there will always be criticism on what the government decides to do. This is true even though it is mostly critics who argue about the
educational system, while Japanese parents might not be as invested in the subject as the scholars and therefore lack the knowledge to judge the situation fully.

All in all the Japanese educational system is very varying and does create a lot of opportunities for people who may not make it into university, though the job market might be hard to get into, and the raise and benefits of having a university education may be good, that does not mean that common people need to struggle to stay in school. The number of people entering university also seems to be proof of that people can make it in life even though their parents may not be what is considered to be rich. I will hopefully keep increasing in the future, and maybe eventually more reforms that help people pay for their studies will go through, making university a goal more people can reach rather than having to give up in high school.
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