

Education in Japan: Does it

By Michelle Lalonde
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At 6 p.m., on a perfect spring afternoon in Tokyo, forty restless ten-year-olds sit in a classroom at Toshin Juku, a coaching school, studying geometry. The students have already put in a full day of regular school and they will be hard at work at the juku until after 9 p.m..

"I go to the juku every evening so that I can go on to a good junior high school like my sister," says one girl in the class. "On Saturdays I have regular school in the morning, then piano lessons, and then calligraphy lessons. Sunday I go to another juku.

The walls of the juku are plastered with the photos and names of past students who are now studying at Tokyo University (Todai), the most prestigious university in Japan. There are also lists of the "Best 10" and "Best 30" students currently enrolled in the juku; monthly school-wide examinations feed the spirit of competition

among the students.

"At my daughter's school," says Akiko Shinoda, a free-lance interpreter, "the teachers ask us not to send our kids to juku because they come to school so tired every day."

Shinoda, like many young Japanese mothers, is very critical of the juku system.

"They teach you little magic equations — like puzzles — so that you can pass a certain school's examination," she says, "but you can never use that knowledge again. They do not teach

"In Japan, it is very hard to enter university..."

you how to think."

But the number of jukus in Japan is approaching 200,000 and one out of every three Japanese children go to juku at some point in their education. There are jukus which specialize in helping students pass tests to get into the better junior high schools, senior high schools and universities. There are even jukus which help students pass exams to get into the better jukus.

Combined, jukus pull in over 9 billion yen (almost \$85 million Canadian) in revenue each year.

"In Japan, parents have only a few children," explains Shunzo Shinohara, principal of Higashihara junior high school in Tokyo, "so they want their children to enter prestigious high schools and prestigious universities. We are becoming what is called an academia society."

But there are other factors, besides a culture which equates success with education, that put pressure on Japanese youth to perform. One such factor is business involvement in education.

Until recently, large corporations in Japan could boast freely of accepting applicants from only the top institutions (i.e. those with the most difficult entrance examinations). Though this kind of blatant elitism is now discouraged, the best jobs are still going to graduates of the top five schools: Todai, Keio, Waseda, Chuo and

Kyodai.

Many companies own residences or other facilities which students can use while at school so that company loyalty is developed even before the student is hired.

"The market is directing education in Japan," says Hiroshi Oshima, an official at the Ministry of Education.

Designed to separate the wheat from the chaff, the fiercely competitive entrance examinations also serve to separate the rich from the poor. According to the Ministry of Education, 65.5 per cent of students at Todai come from upper-middle-class families.

The Japanese government, headed by the very conservative Liberal Democratic Party, is well aware of the elitism inherent in the system.

"The fact is, if you want to send your child to the best school you have to send them to a private tutor or a good coaching school and unless you are well off, you can't afford it," says Oshima.

"The university entrance exams are very hard and the bad effects of this are felt in the lives of students at every level," says Oshima. "We must remedy this situation where young people's lives are dominated by entrance exams."

Oshima said a government committee on education reform is looking at several problems in the system, including "Examination Hell".

"While we can't make them easier, last year we reduced the number of subjects on the tests from seven to five and this year we changed the system so that students have two chances to pass the exam instead of only one," he says.

Instead of eliminating the exam system or regulating jukus (juku teachers are not required to have teaching certificates or special training), the government has decided to get in on the money and is considering state-run jukus.

"The reason 'Examination Hell' will not end in Japan is because so many businesses have invested money in it," says Shinoda.

Shigera Yanase is a teacher at Toshin Juku. Yanase was very involved in the

student movement in the 70's which opposed industrial involvement in education, but, like many juku teachers, he has resigned himself to the fact that jukus will exist as long as there is a demand for them by Japanese society.

According to Yanase there are four factors which support the current education system in Japan. "One: the Japanese are industrious and competitive. Two: this is a country where it is difficult to assert one's identity or beliefs. You have to fit in," says Yanase, and thus a standardized system is favored. "Three: Japan prides itself on being a classless society. In a classless society the harder you try the more success you will have, thus the exam system. "And finally, Japan is poor in natural resources, so the only way to survive or prosper is to provide value-added goods," thus the emphasis on hard work, competition and company loyalty.

The effects of heavy standardization are very apparent to a westerner visiting Ichikawa Higashi High School, in Ichikawa City, a Tokyo suburb.

The alternate rows of girls and boys in their crisp navy uniforms with gold buttons present a rather military

"The market is directing education in Japan."

image. They are strikingly quiet and well-behaved; school teachers in Japan complain more about their students' reservedness than discipline problems.

The students are memorizing English phrases from a government prescribed textbook. They have learned to say, "good morning, sir" to all visitors regardless of sex, and to use overly formal phrases in conversation such as "It is a very fine day". The teaching of patternized English is only one example of the problems which arise when curricula are not adapted to the needs of individual schools or students.

"The biggest merit of the Japanese

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