

Juken

Richard Sweet

May 15 2013

## **I. Introduction**

In the state of California we spend a lot of time testing through the K-12 system. Especially with the “No Child Left Behind” law in effect, state mandated testing without fail occurs at least once a year, if not more based on the subject. However, our tests are only to ensure that the statewide curriculum is taught and everyone is at the same point in their education careers. While states like California use tests for no other purpose other than statistics, the educational structure in Japan wholly depends on tests to direct their students to their future, bright or dim.

I chose to study this subject because I wish to become a JET teacher in the future. Teaching English in Japan is different from teaching a foreign language in America. Understanding the Juken system and these differences will lead to a better idea of my role as a teacher in Japan.

Many analysis of the juken and the Center Shiken in Japan have led people, both foreigners and Japanese, to criticize the harshness of the entrance exams. After researching extensively, I have to admit I do understand the critiques, but do not agree with them. Utilizing several scholarly articles, I will look at the pressures placed on students going through the Center Shiken system; analyze the English portion of the tests and how it affects the direction education takes; and explore potential alternatives to the Center Shiken being employed by universities. Despite the flaws in the juken system, I find it to be an effective way of testing and ensuring the right people get into the right colleges.

## **II. Research**

A critical factor in the contention against the Center Shiken is the cram school industry which makes trillions of yen every year providing additional content courses so that future students will be prepared for their exams. Jean-Pierre Antonio discusses how the cram school industry has always been the bridge between schools and the Center Shiken. (2011) Students and people who have failed to get into the college of their choice (ronin) attend these schools in an attempt to get into the best school possible. However, contends Rie Mori, we need to also look at our relationship with these for-profit

cram schools, especially in relation to remedial students. (2002) The cram school system works on getting students ready to take the tests in college, but lacks in teaching future post-secondary students how to be a college student. Amano Ikuo would disagree with Mori through interviews Ikuo had with other teachers. The general opinion of Japanese professors, Ikuo states, “a stringent and difficult examination is by far the most effective and convenient insurance that students will be of high ability, and hence easier to educate.” (2005) Utilizing the cram school systems, schools are already interconnected because cram schools will teach specific material per school. (Waseda and Tokyo would each have their individual tests).

Japan can be known as a *gakureki shakai*, or a school history society. It does not matter if you did well in school, but rather “did you go to the school?” Name means everything in Japanese society. Critics have been quick to attack this system in relation to the Center Shiken because the exam acts as the gateway to all of the good schools. *Gakureki shakai* is so fundamental to Japanese society that it will require a severe restructuring of the system as well as a paradigm shift in the way education is looked at in Japan. (Ikuo 2005, Doyon 2001)

Japan has required English to be taught in junior high and high school for many years, and just recently implemented English classes into elementary schools. However, many Japanese are unable to speak English (including teachers) outside of a select few phrases. Doyon notes how the Ministry of Education has been implementing policies to increase the quality of English classes at the university level. Mike Guest did research on the change in English on the Center Shiken between 1981 and 2006. Even now, the Center Shiken still focuses on phrases and being able to read. They have recently added a listening section to the test, but a speaking component is still not yet used. (Guest 2008) Despite its flaws, however, Guest still believes that the English section is well-diversified. Antonio agrees, but still attacks the lack of English speaking for the Center Shiken. He believes the lack of an interview section contradicts the goals of a government hoping for all Japanese to have the ability to be conversational with English. No one has the motivation to learn how to speak because the Center

Shiken, as well as many of the school specific tests, do not test speaking skills. (2008)

For a long time many public and private schools solely relied on the Center Shiken for admissions. With the downward trend in the birth rate and perspective students, low and middle tier schools have utilized other factors in determining admission. Schools have been forced to close because there were not enough students; other schools, in order to survive, have had to rethink the admissions process. Doyon offers up some alternatives such as eliminating the school specific tests or looking at grades received during high school. However, Mori provides Keio University, one of the top ranking private schools in Japan, as an example of changes in the system. Keio University opened its admissions office in 1990. This office took admissions away from faculty and instead placed it with administrators. These administrators could then take the time to look at more than just mental or test-taking ability, but rather looked at the more human parts of education such as extracurricular activities and volunteer work.

### **III. Interpretation**

I remember hearing about cram schools while watching anime five years ago. Initially, I thought the only purpose to these schools were to get the students back on track if they were falling behind. After taking this class, however, I realize cram schools were never for those who were behind, but rather for those want to be ahead. When it becomes absolutely necessary to pay thousands of dollars a month to attend additional school, I believe these cram schools need to be looked at by the government and reformed. They are a large contributor to the economy of Japan and offer many jobs to teachers, but a system I have to pay more for to have a slightly higher chance of getting into the college I want is too much.

Center Shiken and *shiken jigoku* is so adamantly etched into the minds of everyone participating because it is directly related to the success you will have later in life. The idea of the *gakureki shakai* is one never looked upon by Americans seriously. We do have our Ivy League schools which guarantee success to those who can afford it and maintain the grades, but there still has to be some merit

involved. American society does not look at the school so much as what you did in school. A person who got a 4.0 GPA and did some volunteer work but went to a low-tier school will still be looked at because they were able to prove they could work in an academic environment. *Gakureki shakai* is an odd concept because I have been raised in a merit-based society. Thinking that my school is more important than my abilities would depress me, and I probably would never have started school at a community college. I can appreciate the Japanese system for its straight-forwardness, but I would never want to use the system here in America.

English education is by far the most important part of my studies because it directly affects what and how I teach in a Japanese school setting. Before I had heard that Japan was a test-based society, I had thought teaching English in Japan would be a fun experience. I could interact with the students directly and give them personal knowledge about a culture they usually only hear about on television.

When I went to Gunma to do my high school study abroad session, however, my dreams were partially shattered. The English speech teacher (who was a JET) was forced to use only scripts and conversation trees in order to teach basic phrases. He was not allowed to go outside the script to teach them how to actually use English, but rather gave them phrases that were for specific situations. His only time he was able to teach conversational and appropriate English was through the “Let’s Speak English” club he created. Unfortunately, much like how Antonio had discussed in his article, not many people were interested in learning English except for preparing to take the exams. Only one student showed up every week to practice conversational English with the speech teacher. This makes me wonder what type of teacher I will be while in Japan, and if I am forced to conform to the lesson plans created by the teacher of the curriculum, will I begin to resent teaching?

In America there is a heavy reliance on grades received whether you come from high school or a community college. Our system, however, has always been willing to look at the human factors of education. For most of the elite schools, GPA is simply not enough, especially if you are coming from high school. They want to see people who have joined clubs and helped contribute to society in

whatever way possible. Considering the reliance on the Center Shiken in Japan, when I see a school like Keio offer to look at human interaction as well intellectual ability, it gives me hope that the Japanese educational system can begin to look at a variety of people in a new light.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Despite all flaws I see with this system, I still cannot help but agree with how the Center Shiken is looked upon. Benjamin Hill, looked at the observation: "Hardly a soul in the entire country will say anything publicly in its favor", and questioned why this is the case. (1996) After researching this topic, I believe I have come to the same conclusion Hill has. There is no subjectivity to this test. You either got the right or wrong answer, and the score you received you deserved. I can appreciate this level of directness because it is simple to understand and leaves out the ability of human error on the test. I believe this is also the reason for a lack of an interview section on the Center Shiken. No one wants to lose points just because they gave an answer that the person grading did not appreciate.

However, there are flaws that need to be addressed. Schools have been forced to close because of the shrinking population. While I did not study specifically the damages of a shrinking population to the educational system, all of my research did point out that this is becoming a critical issue. English education also needs to be discussed. Due to the nature of the Center Shiken, English education's importance has been greatly diminished to only memorizing the necessary phrases. After they are finished and placed into the school of their choice, English serves no purpose to them anymore unless they decide to become an English major.

In conclusion, Japan has a lot of work to do, but I believe they are going in the right direction. There may not be a way to immediately solve the *gakureki shakai* issue outside of a large shift in Japanese society, but the way the Japanese system is trying to adapt to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and its evolving idea of the role of education is an important first step in changing the paradigm.

## Works Cited

- Guest, M. (n.d.). A comparative analysis of the Japanese university entrance *sen* shiken based on a 25-year gap. (2008). *JALT Journal*, 30(1), 85-104. Retrieved from <http://jalt-publications.org/archive/jj/2008a/art5.pdf>
- Hill, B. (n.d.). Breaking the rules in Japanese schools: *Kosoku ihan*, academic competition, and moral education. (1996). *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 27(1), 90-110.
- Mori, R. (n.d.). Entrance examinations and remedial education in Japanese higher education. (2002). *Higher Education*, 43(1), 27-42.
- Ikuo, A., & Poole, G. (n.d.). The Japanese university in crisis. (2005). *Higher Education*, 50(4), 685-711.
- Antonio, J. P. (2011). Examination and evaluation of the English portion of the center shiken. *鈴鹿国際大学紀要 Campana*, 17, 157-168.
- Doyon, P. (2001). A review of higher education reform in modern Japan. *Higher Education*, 41(4), 443-470. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3448133?>