

Title:

Beyond a “Free Version of Paid Juku”:
An Autoethnographic Inquiry into Educational Practice at a Japanese Free Cram School

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Research Overview:

Free cram schools (*muryō juku*) emerged in 2010s Japan to address inequality in access to shadow education. Through autoethnographic fieldwork at a free juku in Aichi Prefecture, this study asks whether free juku merely replicate paid juku, and identifies a distinct, dialogical educational logic in free juku settings.

Purpose of Study:

Japan engages intensively in shadow education (Yung & Bray, 2024). The most recent national survey (MEXT, 2025) reports that 43.9% of Grade 6 and 56.9% of Grade 9 students attend a *gakushū juku*, and participation is sharply stratified by family and neighbourhood SES (Matsuoka, 2015, 2018). Coupled with weak state regulation, this stratification has allowed juku to sustain anti-meritocratic access to higher education (Samuell, 2023). In response, civil-society actors have established free cram schools (*muryō juku*) since the 2010s, operated largely by NPOs and volunteers.

Existing scholarship has noted a tension between welfare and educational logics in such settings (Narisawa, 2018). At the same time, free juku in Japan are commonly framed as simply “a free version of paid juku.” This common framing, however, has not been examined from the standpoint of those who have actually taught in both kinds of setting, and the educational practice within free juku may differ from this framing.

This study therefore asks: Are Japanese free juku really a “free version of paid juku”? No prior study has examined this question from the inside view of a teacher who has worked in both kinds of setting. International relevance is twofold. First, similar civil-society and state responses to shadow-education inequality exist regionally — the Boyo Foundation and Taiwan Fund for Children and Families in Taiwan, after-school programmes in South Korea — and in the United States as out-of-school-time programmes for low-income youth. Second, free, equity-oriented provision has remained at the margins of the field, partly because privateness and for-profitness has long been treated as definitional.

Research Methods:

The study employs autoethnography, building on a small body of self-studies by shadow-

education providers (Petsiotis, 2022; Yung, 2019). Yung's (2019) inquiry into his own successive roles as tutee, tutor, and researcher in Hong Kong is the closest precedent; whereas Yung traced these roles diachronically, this study examines my contrasting engagements with two distinct shadow-education sites.

My positionality is rare. Until 2017, I worked full-time as a professional teacher at a paid juku in Japan; since November 2024, I have volunteered nearly weekly at a free juku in Aichi Prefecture. While university students often move between paid juku part-time work and free juku volunteering, former full-time paid juku teachers seldom transition into free juku; this trajectory makes intra-personal comparison possible.

The autoethnographic focus of the study is on how my stance toward children, and my underlying conception of education, have shifted through ongoing engagement with the free juku. The analytic strategy is to examine these shifts in the present, and — in the course of writing about them — to retrospectively re-read my prior practice as a paid juku teacher. The contrast between the two sites is reconstructed through reflexive remembering rather than concurrent observation. Data consist of field notes written after each volunteer session since November 2024. Analysis is anchored in Freire's (1970) distinction between banking and problem-posing/dialogical education.

Results and Discussion:

Preliminary analysis identifies three interrelated shifts in my stance, each readable through a Freirean lens:

- (1) Decontextualisation versus narrative listening. Reflexive re-reading of my paid juku period reveals that I consistently treated each student as a decontextualised, homogenised case to deliver standardised outcomes — an instance of the banking model. In the free juku, sustained engagement has gradually shifted my stance toward listening to each student's particular story and life circumstances.
- (2) Transactional containment versus relational surplus. The paid juku optimised encounters around contracted instructional time, with relational engagement subordinated to billable units. The free juku has generated relational surplus — interactions that exceed the immediate instructional task and that the paid juku's framework would have treated as inefficient.
- (3) Static teacher versus mutually transformed teacher. In retrospect, my own conception of children rarely shifted through interaction in the paid juku setting. In the free juku, such shifts occur and are experienced as intrinsically valuable — precisely the mutuality Freire identified as constitutive of dialogical education.

Together, these findings suggest that free juku are not reducible to a "free version of

paid juku.” A distinct educational logic emerges, in which equity is enacted not only through access but through a different mode of pedagogical relationship.

Internationally, the findings invite reconsideration of how state-led and civil-society-led responses to shadow-education inequality are evaluated. Equity policy should attend not only to who can access tutoring, but to how teachers and learners are positioned, and whether pedagogical practice reproduces or interrupts the banking model.