

Buxiban in Taiwan

If you stand in front of Taipei's main train station, you will see many *buxibans* (補習班, or 'cram schools') along the road. Each day after dark, a large number of students flood into these *buxibans*. Seeing this overcrowded street scene, full of anxious students, teachers, and parents, you will recognize how prevalent supplementary education is in Taiwan.

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IT IS BELIEVED that the majority of secondary students attend this kind of for-profit institute to seek supplemental drilling and practice after a long day at their regular schools. Unlike their western counterparts who favour extra-curriculum activities such as sports or games, teenagers in Taiwan attend *buxiban* instead due to a mixture of exam anxiety, peer-group pressure, and high parental academic expectation.

Why are cram schools so common in Taiwan?

Taiwan shares an important trait with other East Asian cultures: a high respect for academic study and for intellectuals, influenced by Chinese Confucianism. Most parents believe that if their children can enter a higher-ranked high school or university, they will have a better career in the future. In order to achieve this goal, most parents do not hesitate to send their children to cram schools for extra instruction if they can afford it. Taiwan's Ministry of Education has launched a series of education reform programs, including a new version of curriculum guidelines and textbooks, in an attempt to relieve student's exam pressure and to combat rote-memory studying. Moreover, a multi-track school entrance plan has been established so that students with other talents can still enter good schools even though their academic test scores are not so high.

However, these reform efforts not only have not succeeded in alleviating students' stress, but instead they have increased the number of students attending cram schools. Students nowadays are not only studying their exam subjects, but also cramming for skills and talents, hoping to equip themselves with more qualifications for university entrance. As a result, cram schools have boomed unexpectedly, and the number has roughly doubled across the country. In 2001, Taiwan had 5,891 registered cram schools and the number has been growing rapidly since then. More than 18,300 registered cram schools are currently active in shadow education, with 15,248 schools centered on traditional school subjects like Chinese and English language, and sciences. Taipei has the greatest number of cram schools compared to the rest of country (2,786 schools), and the area surrounding Taipei is a close second with 2,672 schools. According to a national survey in Taiwan, most cram schools target elementary school and junior high school students, and indeed these groups have made up almost 84 percent of the total cram school enrollment since 2005.

The structure of the cram school industry

There are two categories of cram schools in Taiwan: academic cram schools and those offering non-academic subjects. The academic ones include those who only focus on the core school subjects Chinese, English, Math and Sciences which are included in high school and college entrance exams. In these *buxibans*, a single teacher often provides a group of students with materials and instructions for subjects taught in regular school. Most academic cram schools require that teachers hold at least a bachelor degree. In fact, nowadays many of these teachers hold a higher academic degree. Some cram school teachers are paid a very high salary if their teaching style is deemed interesting and effective, and they usually teach at several cram schools.

The number of students in each class varies with the size of the cram school. In the case of a large cram school, some classes might include more than one hundred students. Sometimes several LCD projectors are needed for teaching such a large class. In these classes, students take notes on the teacher's lecture. If they have any questions, they can either ask the teacher during class or afterwards.

Another kind of supplementary education institution, known as *an-chinban* (安親班), employs teachers or supervisors whose main duty is to look after a group of children (usually at primary school level) and to help them with their homework and assignments after school until the parents are free to pick them up.

In non-academic cram schools the teaching program is not directly related to the regular school curriculum. Some common types are talent and skills classes, where a teacher provides a group of students with a program designed only for a specific subject or course, such as a foreign language other than English, music, art, dance, sports or other talent-oriented activities. Some cram schools, especially those focused on foreign languages, became so popular that they set up national chain-schools with branches spread throughout the country. Some have even expanded into the mainland Chinese market. In general, large language cram schools have their own administration system, separate teacher training programs, and individual curriculum design. Some cram schools co-exist with regular schools and have even prospered into multi-million education enterprises, not only charging high tuition fees from students but also benefitting from charging licensing fees from their chain schools.

Above:
Buxibans, Taipei.
Courtesy Flickr
(Taekwonweirdo).

Below:
The lobby of a
buxiban is a busy
place as students
hurry to their
next classes.

Photos by the
authors.

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Serving many needs

What are the reasons behind the success of Taiwan's cram schools? According to some research studies on *buxiban* in Taiwan (Chen 2007, Huang 1981, Hsu 2002, Lei 1999), students seek out supplementary education for the following reasons:

1. To enhance their academic performance: The stated purpose of cram schools is to improve students' academic performance, especially their test scores. Students who fall behind academically at school will choose to attend cram schools in order to have extra instruction.
2. In response to the very high social value placed on acquiring a college degree – so-called credentialism: Parents send their children to *buxiban* to meet the needs of exam-driven practices and drilling which they feel regular schools might not be sufficiently focused on.
3. Parents' high expectations for children: Parents who expect their children to achieve highly will never be content with their children's grades, and are very likely to send their children to cram schools to improve their performance.
4. Public schools cannot satisfy students' needs to enhance their academic performance: Even though Taiwan has a well-established public education system, the quality of its teachers does not always meet parental expectations in areas such as teacher attitudes, teaching skills, etc.
5. It is also argued there is a gap between what students learn at school and what is covered in the school entrance examinations, so students feel that they must attend exam-oriented cram schools in order to achieve high grades.
6. Students overestimate cram schools and blindly follow others: Many Taiwanese students believe that cram schools are better at teaching, so expect that attending cram schools will help them understand course materials better.

Questions and concerns

Since cram schools are so prevalent in Taiwan, some resulting problems deserve attention.

1. Teaching in cram schools progresses at a faster pace than in schools, causing students to disrespect and disregard their teachers' instructions at school.
2. Students tend not to work at school but rely entirely on cram schools.
3. Students have to mind school and cram schools at the same time, which increases stress.
4. Students lose their ability to explore knowledge due to an exam-driven pedagogy.
5. Teachers at cram schools do not have teacher certificates and are not qualified personnel, which may have a negative impact on student learning attitude and educational value.

There is no doubt that cram schools are a very significant part of supplementary education in Taiwan in core academic subjects as well as in broader education. Nevertheless, the prevalence of cram schools brings about some reflections on the education system among parents. Mixed feelings about the existence of cram school have been expressed. If cram schools are sufficiently competitive to help students to improve their academic performance and succeed in the college entrance exam, the competitiveness of public schools will be in great doubt.

Buxiban do not operate for free but charge significant fees which places a financial burden on parents. Poor families cannot afford to send their children to cram schools. Can public schools provide competitive education quality to meet the needs of students from less advantaged background?

If the existence of cram school in Taiwan is unavoidable, how can we improve the quality of public schools, alleviate the pressure on students from entrance exams, and convince parents not to over-load their children and to respect their talents more widely instead of focusing only on academic performance? These are questions yet to be answered.

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