

**Chapter 34 Viewpoint Activity**

Many people think that Japan's economic success (textbook pages 877-878) is due partly to the way Japanese young people are educated. In the first excerpt below, an American journalist describes the students he observed. In the second, a Japanese-American writer now living in Tokyo looks at another experience. ♦ *As you read, notice the differences between your experiences and those of teenagers in Japan. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

## Looking at Teenagers in Japan

### Nicholas Kristof

Schools are social cookie-cutters in Japan, assembly lines that press students into the same shape and constantly remind them that they are members of a larger community. Rules are ubiquitous,<sup>1</sup> and the atmosphere even at public schools is a bit like that of an American military school.

Omiya Junior High [in central Japan], for instance, not only stipulates the uniform but also bans wristwatches, hair ribbons, curled hair, bleached hair, perfume, scented deodorant, earrings, makeup, money, non-standard school bags or anything else that could set one student apart from another. The school even bans colorful shoes, although footwear is left at the entrance and exchanged for identical slippers that students and teachers wear inside the school building.

Yet the student whom the others describe as the coolest kid in the junior high school, Kazuhiro Fujikura, has triumphed over the homogenization process—and that is what makes him so *kakkoii*, or cool. That plus the fact that, although mediocre academically, he is a good baseball player and, as 14-year-old Asaha Shimomura gushed, “he’s so cute.”

<sup>1</sup> everywhere at the same time

### Karl Taro Greenfeld

Hiro Ikeda, a chubby, bespectacled boy about to turn eighteen, studied the pass list posted on the wrought-iron gates of the Komaba campus of the University of Tokyo. Four thousand eight hundred fifty-six kanji (Japanese names) were listed—but not his. He had failed the University of Tokyo entrance exam. For a full ten minutes Hiro stood frozen in total shock amid hundreds of other black uniform-clad high school and juku (cram school) students. . . . To Hiro it was as if some avatar<sup>2</sup> had descended and told a few lucky souls they were destined for heaven and that the rest were condemned to hell.

Exam hell. Because anyone failing the University of Tokyo, or Todai (pronounced “toad-eye”), entrance exam . . . becomes a ronin, a masterless samurai, as he spends the next year or two or three, cramming, cramming, and cramming for another try. “Being a ronin, having to study every day, all day long, and practically never going out, is so bad.” Hiro grimaces.

Sources: “Japan’s Schools: Orderly and Crime-Free but Not Much Fun,” by Nicholas D. Kristof (*New York Times*, July 18, 1995); (2) *Speed Tribes*, by Karl Taro Greenfeld (HarperCollins, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> the human incarnation of a god

### Questions to Discuss

1. What kinds of rules do students at Omiya Junior High have to follow?
2. If cram schools are “exam hell,” why do students like Hiro go there?
3. **Making Comparisons** How do you think a student from Japan would react to your school? What would you think about attending a school like Omiya?