1.

a.

One major positive aspect of my educational background (and by positive, I mean conducive to my overall academic success) was the hidden curriculum of the school I attended from kindergarten to middle school. The school, a prime example of Bowles and Gintis’ correspondence theory, was dedicated to preparing kids of a high socioeconomic background for management positions and other high-ranking positions within the productive apparatus that they were to occupy in the future. As such, the school placed great emphasis on liberal studies and strove to equip students with critical thinking and problem-solving skills that would aid them in their future occupations. Students were constantly encouraged to come up with creative solutions to difficult problems and urged to speak their minds and express themselves. The effect that this form of education had on my intellectual tendencies and personal values was immeasurable. It shaped my intellectual attitude and enabled me to think critically without mindlessly submitting to authority and subscribing to institutionally ingrained ideas and beliefs. In short, the bourgeois primary education I received gave me the capacity to think for myself and form my own opinions. Had I spent the early stages of my education in a school primarily dealing with low SES, blue-collar households, I would have most likely acquired an essentially reactionary form of intelligence characterized by submission and obedience, and would not have been blessed with the academic success that I enjoy today.

b.

The general lack of aspirations for academic success that characterized my high school had a negative effect on my academic pursuits. Doubtlessly a negative aspect of my education, the absence of any sort of motivation to work hard towards higher academic achievements created an atmosphere of despair and resignation among students, with many of them brushing off the possibility of moving on to a good university as completely unrealistic. Even the teachers were skeptical of the academic potential of their students. Often, they would discourage those with high expectations for their future and urge them to discard ambitious plans for higher education in favor of more “realistic” alternatives. Such a climate of disapproval and low expectations presented great difficulties in maintaining one’s self-confidence concerning academia, and the effects of this on students’ ambitions were evident. Most students had very little confidence in their academic abilities and were content with settling with wherever place of higher education would accept them. After spending years in that environment, I also came to doubt my academic abilities and at one point gave up on studying altogether, believing that it was no use and that my future was decided by the high school I was attending. In reality, my grades were quite good, and anyone could’ve objectively observed that I had a decent chance at getting into a good university. However, after being conditioned into believing that I wasn’t qualified to vie for higher academic achievement, I compromised and moderated my ambitions, setting lower goals for myself. If my high school had encouraged me to keep my ambitions and push myself rather than make concessions and settle for less, I might have been more academically successful.

2.

i.

The main function of compulsory education in Japan, in its present state at least, is the justification of meritocracy. Compulsory education started out as a means to diminish social inequality by ensuring that all people have equal access to education. It was thought that by providing the same minimum level of education to all people, “equality of opportunity” would be achieved, but research continually suggests that this is not the case. Social inequality still looms large after the installation of compulsory education, and the current school system has repeatedly been proven to be ineffective in reducing inequality and cancelling the effects of socioeconomic disparity on the academic achievements of students. The biggest factor that determines academic and social success is, to this day, the socioeconomic status of the individual and their family. Compulsory education does not level the playing field, it merely masks the brazen inequality in the educational process by pedaling the lie of “equality of opportunity” and asserting that all students were given an equal shot at success and everyone deserves their place in society. Those who succeeded did so by their own doing, and those who failed deserve their failure. This is the central message of meritocracy, and it is this meritocracy that compulsory education validates by providing the pretext that all people are ensured a fair chance. Compulsory education conceals the existence of inequality, and by doing so contributes to the reproduction and perpetuation of social division based solely on socioeconomic conditions.

ii.

The role of upper secondary education is to put students on “tracks” and structurally divide students based on their competence and interests. Because upper secondary education is not obligatory in Japan, high schools make use of entrance examinations in order to decide which students to accept. This creates a hierarchy of schools, with the higher ranking schools taking kids with exceptional academic abilities while lower ranking schools take students who are not as academically gifted. What this does is it categorizes students based solely on their academic proficiency and puts students on “tracks” based on the level of their school. At higher ranking schools students are expected to excel academically and move on to prestigious universities and other institutions for higher education, while at lower ranking schools students aren’t necessarily expected to perform so highly and are not prepared for the rigorous testing of entrance exams. Students are divided on a societal level via the high school system, their future and highest educational attainment determined for the most part by the level of the high school they attend. Upper secondary education in Japan has become one large apparatus for the classification of students based on academic proficiency, which feeds into a broader division of labor within society.

3.

i.

I believe that the ideal form of compulsory school education should teach no more than an absolute minimum of knowledge necessary for students to engage in individual intellectual pursuits. In my view, the whole idea of having a centralized educational system, an institutional process of initiation that all citizens must go through, is obsolete. School, at present, has a monopoly on knowledge. It dictates what sort of knowledge is to be taught to the younger generation, and conditions students into believing that the only true form of intelligence is intelligence imparted through the school system. Educational establishments inculcate in students a new form of logic; a logic where escalation in the social structure via various institutional processes is equated with success and deemed valuable. The pupil is thereby schooled to mistake curricular teachings with learning, a diploma with intelligence, fluency within the accepted form of language with the ability to be creative, and so on. Here the individual’s imagination and creativity (indeed, the individual’s subjectivity) is tarnished, and in her arises the proclivity to reject that which holds true value in favor of institutional values. However, it is exactly this kind of obsession with institutional values that breeds inequality and social division, for institutional values hold that a person’s value is to be measured by the institutional processes that the person undergoes, and the capacity to undergo institutional processes, or in other words have a school education, ties in closely to the person’s socioeconomic status and other factors beyond the person’s control. In a society where people share the same institutional values, those who are well equipped to undergo certain institutional processes, like attend university, have a considerable advantage over those who face difficulties in doing the same, whether that be because of socioeconomic factors or other reasons. The institutional model of education that is the school system is inherently rigged against the poor and unblessed.

This is why school must not be centralized, information must not be monopolized and dictated, and education must not be institutionalized. Instead, education should be an individual endeavor that is not defined or pointed in one direction, and school must only teach the bare minimum needed in this personalized pursuit, namely the ability to read, write and think. Furthermore, school must not demand too much time from students, and should not be perceived as their primary source of education. Education must not be delegated to a certain institution like school but treated as an essential part of everyday life, as a process entailing both children and adults. Of course, this would mean that the means of education, or educational resources, must be held open and accessible to everyone, but in the age of the internet such an interpersonal network of information wouldn’t be difficult to establish. With such a network established, each person can individually pursue whichever trade or discipline they are most drawn to, and this would in turn create a set of diverse and unique individuals, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, that companies and places of higher, more specialized education can choose from. In addition, to compensate for the function of signaling one’s capabilities that educational attainment had, a system of highly specialized testing to validate one’s knowledge in a certain area could be organized.

The benefits of such a system are countless. Students will be able to pursue their interests in different fields for the sake of education and not to improve their value in the eyes of the establishment. Educational resources will be fairly accessible to all, and educational opportunities will lie everywhere in one’s life regardless of age or socioeconomic conditions. Society will stop appraising individuals one-dimensionally based on their academic credentials and will start assessing them for their actual attributes and amount of effort put into educational pursuits. The important part here is to minimize the role that wealth, chance and other socioeconomic factors play in an individual’s social opportunities, and also to disestablish the institutional hierarchy taught in schools that deems certain lifestyles and occupations superior to others. This will help to reduce social inequality and ensure a true equality of opportunity among all people as much as possible. Above all, the implementation of such a model of education would restore education to its original form: a liberating and intellectually exhilarating endeavor to be enjoyed by all.

ii.

Following the thread of my previous argument, the ideal form of upper secondary education is a form in which a centralized institution like school does not exist. By the age of high school, after undergoing the minimal level of compulsory education, students will be equipped with the ability to self-learn. Upper secondary education must allow students to use their time freely for intellectual pursuits which appeal the most to them. Introducing a reward system to spur active engagement and involvement in educational activities is something to consider, but hopefully, if the new educational model is successful in popularizing academia as an end in itself, there wouldn’t be any need for such incentivizing. Students should be left to pursue education at their own will.