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# PROPOSAL OF THE NEW SCHOOL-EDUCATION SYSTEM FOR UNDER-POPULATED AREAS IN JAPAN

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**ABSTRACT:** School education is one of the most important social systems. Japan has been facing serious problems with its education system associated with the accelerated growth of its senior population and very low birth rate.

As a means of assisting to resolve this problem it is required to create a new schooling system based on the new value for children, for families and for the community by focusing on both the school-system and the problem of ageing. We propose a new schooling-system as one of the solutions.

**KEYWORD:** innovation of social organization, Flexible Accommodation Schooling System, demographics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Demographics” and “Change in perception, mood and meaning’ are pointed out by Peter F. Drucker amongst 7 sources for innovative Opportunities. These two areas are the issues in this thesis as significant changes of the social environment in recent Japan.

It is said that the total population of Japan is likely to start decreasing this year. In case of Kochi Prefecture, a natural change (Live births-Deaths) in population has turned to the negative since 1990, and ageing speed has accelerated, in particular in rural areas of Japan. Thus the population structure has been changing very quickly.

On the other hand, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Japanese employed workers accepted a life style that concentrated on work, by bearing long commute times to and from their work-place, living in small houses, and minimizing the time that they could spend with their family. The bulk population of this generation is approaching retirement from the front line of business, and as such are expected to create a new different culture. This new culture will bring with it new values that have never been recognized before.

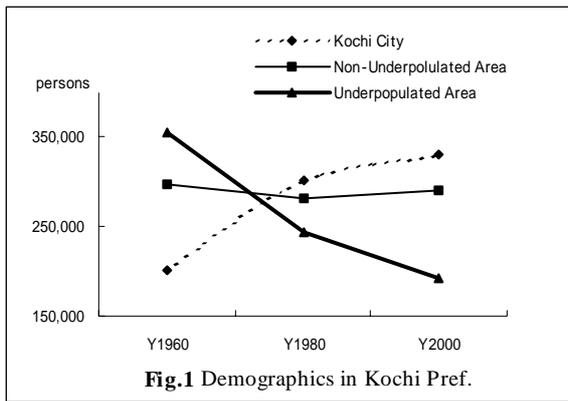
Taking into account the significant and rapid social environmental changes in Japan, the school education system is one of the major social systems that will also need a fundamental change. I have, with this thesis, attempted to draw a picture of how to implement changes in those seriously struggling small and rural public schools to a more viable model in favour of the children.

The first idea to the existing schooling system (i.e. public elementary school and lower secondary school, age 7 to 15) was proposed in my thesis at the graduate course of the Kochi University of Technology. This thesis combined the first research with a series of discussions and findings at a committee organized by the Kochi Prefecture Board of Education in May 2006, of which I was a member.

## 2. BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

### 2.1 Decrease of population, and ageing society

As mentioned, the total population of Japan is forecast to start shrinking from a year of 2007. I researched recent social environmental changes in Kochi Prefecture, which is one of the typical rural parts of Japan. Fig. 1 shows the change of population by areas in Kochi.



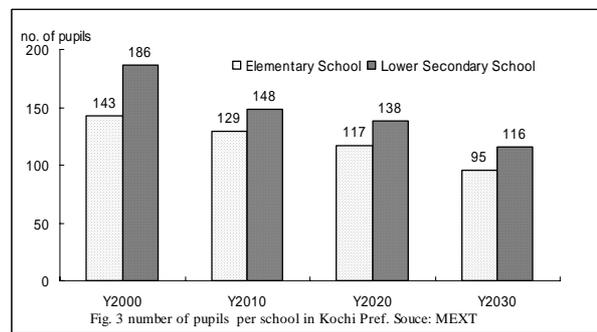
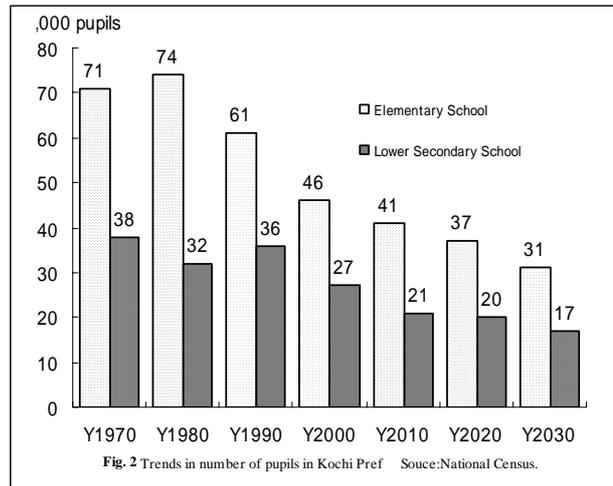
In Kochi pref., as at February 2005, 34 of 48 city/villages are under-populated; this indicates 75% in area and 24% in population. In under-populated areas, the population has decreased by 46% since 1960 and the shrinkage has been accelerating. The situation of ageing with the low number of births in Kochi has 10 years ahead compared to the average of the other areas of Japan.

In under-populated areas the most business activities rely on a budget of municipal government, the economy is also shrinking followed by the drift of population away from the area. There is a negative chain-reaction as follows: Ageing & Low birth rate ➡ Drift of Population ➡ Fiscal Damages ➡ Living Environmental Damages ➡ Migration ➡ Further Ageing & Low-birth Rate.

## 2.2 Current situation of schools in under-populated areas

In Kochi, approximately 38% of elementary schools have very small numbers of pupils, i.e. less than 50 pupils per school (6 year-education), and this is the third highest ratio in Japan. The small school ratio of 36% of lower secondary schools (3 year-education) is the worst in Japan.

There has been a large shrinkage in number of pupils at schools, particularly in under-populated areas (Fig.2 & 3). What would happen to the local society, then? Families that feel anxiety about the education system at such schools move to city areas where they feel more comfortable about the quality of educational environment.



This social phenomenon, obviously, results in making small-schools smaller. Eventually, a school is closed. These situations again lead to further anxieties about school. I point out new mechanism in a migration change in population rooted in school education in question (Fig.4).

In rural areas, many schools are forced to adopt multi-grade classes to continually exist, and are making great effort to increase enrolment from adjacent prefectures by using their accommodation facilities. However, the number of children of small schools are still getting smaller year-by-year, despite various efforts to maintain an adequate number of children at these schools.

When a school closes, pupils are obliged to spend much longer travelling time to go to school each day. In fact some children spend about two hours to go to school, and a similar time to return home each day. Under the circumstances, there is no doubt that the studying environment of the children has deteriorated. Children at a small class and school are

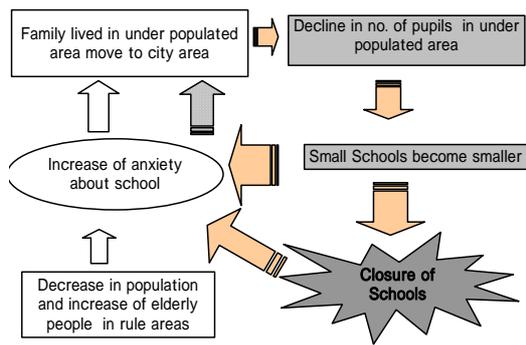


Fig. 4 Chain action mechanism in population caused by education

lacking in opportunity to improve themselves together through friendly rivalry, and to gain social / communication skills.

### 3. PROPOSAL OF NEW SCHOOLING SYSTEM

#### 3.1 Concept of the school

The theme of this thesis is to propose a creative solution to the above-mentioned problems at small schools in Japan. The concept is simple and clear, that is “Combination”(Fig.5). The “Combination” means the following three aspects;

- 1) Pupils who go to remote schools come together to a school to form adequate sizes of classes and schools, i.e the integration of small schools.
- 2) Accordingly, teachers and education boards as a source of running these schools are also integrated into one school. However, the children’s families will remain local.
- 3) Cooperatively work together with another social system, e.g. social welfare function to handle senior/elderly peoples’ matters in the local community

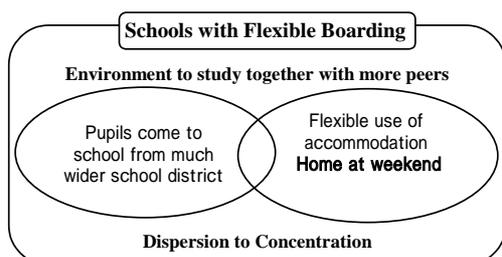


Fig. 5 Concept of New Schooling System

It is clear that the studying environment of children at school will become much better when the number of children is increased in those schools. Here, we need to think again, about how the pupils travel to school. It is unreasonable to force children to spend 2hours everyday to come to school. Consequently, a viable option would be to provide student with accommodation facilities adjacent to the schools.

This is, however, not a traditional boarding style school as a result of integration of small schools. This school has a unique feature that pupils come to school on Monday morning by bus/parents’ car and spend 5days at school and accommodation, and leave school Friday afternoon to go home to enjoy weekends with their family for 3nights.

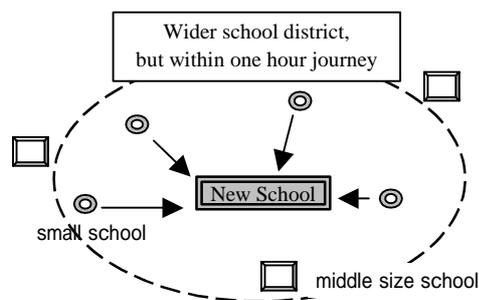


Fig. 6 Image of Integration of small schools  
Source: Report of Research about Boarding School by Kochi Pref. 2007

The point is that a flexible way of using accommodation provides the children and family with joy and advantages. The local community also receives a valuable benefit as the local area is served by a stable and reliable schooling system. It is an indisputable fact, as has been witnessed in many parts of the world that where there is a reliable educational schooling system, there is long-term prosperity.

There is a major difference between other Japanese boarding schools and this school model. This model is founded on the principle to provide an attractive local school by the local community, families who are willing to send children to school, and pupils who also wish to go these schools themselves and not solely by the municipal education board. This school is not simply provided by the government,

but is to be formed by spontaneous contributions in combination between the school, local community and family with strong and clear policy of “we are here for children”.

The outline of the school is that small schools are integrated to one new school to accommodate an adequate number of children who are able to come to school approximately within one hour from home. Pupils are either boarders or commuters who live closely around the school area. The schools are given a flexibility to create an attractive curriculum owing to the advantageous principles of the flexible accommodation schooling system (F.A.S.S.)

There is another feature of this new schooling system. This system can provide a large number of “active seniors” who are going to retire from the front line of business with a rewarding opportunity to take part in educational activities at local school in their second life.

Boarding life at F.A.S.S. can be attractive in terms

of:

- 1) Attaining a manner to keep rules, and discipline
- 2) No journey time and good security during journey between home and school
- 3) Good environment for friendly competitive atmosphere among same-age groups
- 4) Good environmental stimuli among mixed-age group
- 5) Good opportunity to cultivate independent personality through wide range of communications
- 6) Implementation of “food-education”

### 3.2 Image of the boarding life

To get an image of a child’s boarding life, a day-schedule is proposed below (Fig. 7). Owing to the boarding school nature of the system, the school is more flexible and can provide wider options to create a curriculum and after-school activities. In addition, the curriculum can be compiled throughout the whole period of 9 years (6year-elementary school and 3year-lower secondary school compulsory

| Time                   | Elementary School<br>(age, 7-8)          | Elementary School<br>(age 9-12) | Lower Secondary School<br>(age 13-15)    | Low Secondary School<br>(Examination Period) |
|------------------------|--|---------------------------------|--|--|
| 6:50                   | Wake up                                  |                                 |  |  |
| 7:00                   | Clean room, make bed, breakfast          |                                 |  |  |
| 8:00                   | School begins                            |                                 |  |  |
| School Programme       |  |                                 |  |  |
| School day lesson ends |  |                                 |  |  |
|                        | Free time                                |                                 | School Activities                        |  |
| 16:30                  | After School Special Programme at School |                                 | After School Special Programme at school |  |
| 17:50                  | Back to accommodation                    |                                 |  |  |
| 18:00                  | Meal, shower and free time               |                                 |  |  |
| 19:30                  | Self study                               | Nighttime Special Programme     |  | Self study                                   |
| 20:00                  | Free time                                |                                 |  |  |
| 20:20                  | Break                                    |                                 |  |  |
| 20:30                  | Reading, keep diary: quiet time          | Self study                      | Group study                              |  |
| 21:00                  | Bed making and tidy up                   | tidy up                         |  |  |
| 21:10                  | Bedtime                                  | Self study                      | Self study                               | Self study                                   |
| 21:30                  |  | Bed making                      |  |  |
| 21:40                  |  | Bedtime                         |  |  |
| 22:00                  |  |                                 | Bed making                               | Break  |
| 22:10                  |  |                                 | Bedtime                                  | Extended study time                          |
| 23:00                  |  |                                 | Bed making                               |  |
| 23:10                  |  |                                 | Bedtime                                  |  |

Fig 7 Prospective day schedule at FASS  
Source: Report on Research about Boarding School by Kochi Pref, 2007

education in Japan) with a lot of flexibility.

In boarding life, 10 pupils of mixed-age make one group, and 10 pupils of the same-age form one group for study purpose.

There are two major features in a programme. One is “After School Special Programme” and the other is “Night-time Special Programme” at accommodation.

“After School Special Programme” can be an opportunity for a farm work experience or caring service for elderly people etc., and it may be held twice a week for about 90 minutes per programme along with non-boarders, in cooperation with people in the local community, e.g. retired intelligent senior adults. This programme is expected to lower the walls between boarders, day pupils and local community.

“Night-Time Special Programme” is prepared for pupils of upper-age in elementary school and lower secondary school (age 10-15). Pupils make a mixed-age group, and are expected to cooperatively work on a group research. Pupils are given an opportunity to present their research activities once a month. This programme encourages cross-age interaction.

For pupils of lower secondary school, attendance to after school activities or special programmes will be entirely at their own discretion. After “Night time Special Programme, they are requested to study jointly, and senior pupils will be expected to look after the younger as tutors.

#### **A Week Schedule at F.A.S.S.**

From Monday to Friday, children (boarders) stay at school and are accommodated per the fixed day schedule, and they leave for home on Friday afternoon. Children spend their weekends (max. 3 nights) at home with their families. They will then return to school by the following Monday morning.

#### **A Year Schedule at F.A.S.S.**

Families are given a chance to attend various events together with children using boarding house premises for the period of long school holidays. This is a special event for children, parents/families, school members (teachers, housemistress and housemasters etc.) and the local community to foster friendships and share good memories.

F.A.S.S. can provide non-boarders and their families with another advantage. School may look after pupils for example until 8 ‘clock in the evening at the accommodation so that parents can pick them up after work.

### **3.3 Expected emerging Problems/Concerns**

The Kochi Prefecture Education Board conducted a survey about an introduction of F.A.S.S. into the rural areas in Kochi Prefecture. Approximately 70% of people answered negatively, expressing concerns mainly on two points. The first point expressing concerns about “Weakening the Family (Children-Parents) Relationship” due to the limited time spent at home; the next point expressing concerns about the “Anxiety of boarding small-age pupils (7-9year old)”.

It is said that the richest time as a family is the dinner-time and the relaxing time until going to bed, and through this communication at home children learn a sense of family and belief/value that the parents have.

A counter-proposal is given below as a possible solution to the above expressed concerns:

#### **Damage to the Family (Parents-Children) Relationship**

##### **Solution 1:**

It is essential that parents surely understand the importance of spending the weekend together as a family, and this attitude should be backed by strong confidence why they decide to send children to F.A.S.S. This confidence enables parents to prepare to give a very warm-welcome for their children when they return home every weekend.

**Solution 2:**

Parents are obliged to play a positive role in assisting to run the boarding accommodation-life in collaboration with the school and local community.

**Solution 3:**

Parents and children may jointly take part in special events at school on appropriate occasions during school holidays. This is a unique and valuable opportunity to deepen relationships as a family.

**Solution 4:**

Parents are invited occasionally to stay overnight at the school boarding accommodation to have a good communication network with other parents so that they can share common experiences, both positive and negative factors, about the school life of their children.

**Solution 5:**

A counsellor is assigned to the school for parents.

It is true that communication as a family at F.A.S.S. during weekdays is limited. However, positively thinking, this can be a good chance to evaluate current parents-children relationship. When we begin something completely new, we need to be a little optimistic with careful preparation. If the family successfully attain tips how to accept and enjoy school system of F.A.S.S., then the education ability at home would be boosted up.

**Apprehension to the boarding of small children**

It is natural that children and parents feel anxious about small-age-boarding. When it comes to a particularly young age (ages 7- 9) for boarding pupils, it is unusual and so far never heard of in Japan. Proposed solutions to these anxieties are:

**Solution 1:**

Children are invited to a “taste” of boarding before enrolment, along with their parents.

**Solution 2:**

Low-age pupils do not need to start with 5

day-boarding, but can start with one day or two day boarding each week. Then, gradually the number of boarding days can be increased as they get used to. At the beginning of the boarding, pupils are given a flexible option that anytime they can come and stay overnight at the school accommodation or they can go home if they desire so that they do not feel excessive pressure with the boarding life.

**Solution 3:**

Some beds are allocated for parents use at school accommodation so that parents can stay overnight close to their children. Parents are welcomed for the purpose that they are to play an important role in running F.A.S.S. jointly with the school.

**Solution 4:**

In order to maintain a warm family atmosphere at the boarding accommodation, schoolteachers cannot serve concurrently as a housemaster/housemistress.

**4. CONCLUSION**

In this thesis, I described a hypothesis for a new direction about how to change the school system in rural parts of Japan, which are compelled to evolve, in facing great environmental changes in society, with the significant decline in pupil number projections, accelerating growth of the senior population, or a large number of retirement of active seniors, which will all contribute to create different types of culture. This is considered as an opportunity for innovation as P.F Drucker pointed out.

Schools are one of the most important social organizations and indispensable social systems of society. Schools also tend to remain unchanged. Even if a school becomes too small to exist in terms of educational quality, people in the locale never abandon the existence (not the function) of the school for the sake of the local community.

When people in the area do focus on what is the best educational environment for pupils, and when parents do find a viable schooling system, another social system will emerge in a form of a mutually

supportive community in different functions. Strong mutual belief and clear targets to create a better educational school system for children is a key for innovation for a schooling system, where different types of knowledge that evolve social system create new value in society.

Schools as a social system cannot exist alone in a knowledge-based society, but establishing a reliable schooling-system along with cooperatively working with local people can be a never-fading value in society.

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