Sanson Ryugaku Program in Small Sized Municipalities

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ABSTRACT

How to deal with the decline of school-aged children has become an emergent issue for small-size local governments. The primary objective of this article is to present a successful example of addressing this emergent issue by adapting the Sanson Ryugaku (Study-in-Mountain-Village) program. In this Program, urban kids stay at rural farming or fishing village apart from their parents and study at local schools. This article focuses on the example of Kamikawa-cho in Hyogo Prefecture, Japan, a small sized town with a population of about 13,000 and explores the success factors on the basis of data obtained by my fieldwork. The findings suggest that there are two success factors: programs and hub which could make full use of local resources.

I . Sanson Ryugaku Program in Small Sized Municipalities

How to deal with the decline of school-aged children has become an emergent issue for small-size local governments. Due to the Great Heisei Mergers, which were large municipal mergers and dissolutions between 2000 and 2010, the number of municipalities decreased by half from 3,232 in 1999 to 1,727 as of March 31, 2010 in Japan (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication [MIAC], 2010). However, 43% of the total number of the municipalities consists of those with a population between 10,000 and 50,000, and 27% of them are even smaller municipalities with less than a 10,000 people (MIAC, 2008). That means that about 70% of the municipalities, which are required to establish compulsory schools as national minimum, are small sized municipalities as of November 11, 2008. Moreover, 40% of them are depopulated.
areas and among those depopulated communities, 40% of the local governments pointed out the maintenance of elementary school as a “problem emerging in community” (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport, 2007,p.19). Depopulated areas are defined by article 2 of Special Measures Act for the Promotion of Independence in Depopulated Areas (2000), that is, the areas where it is difficult to maintain regular production activities and the living environment in the community compared to other communities due to the drastic decrease of population. In fact, more and more schools are being integrated and closed. The decline of school-aged children is one reason for the consolidation of schools. However, there are larger problems in communities, such as depopulation, aging population, and urbanization. In the case of elementary schools, nearly 70% of closures were caused by depopulation of the community (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2002).

The primary objective of this article is to present a successful example of addressing the emergent issue by adapting the Sanson Ryugaku (Study-in-Mountain-Village) program. In this Program, urban kids stay at rural farming or fishing village apart from their parents and study at local schools. This article focuses on the example of Kamikawa-cho in Hyogo Prefecture, Japan, a small sized town with a population of about 13,000.

The significance of the Sanson Ryugaku program also brings certain problems (Ataka, Shindo & Hamada, 2005, p.199). On the one hand, its significance lies in: 1) educational achievement of students from urban areas by experiencing nature and labor in the program; 2) revitalization of the local community; and, 3) strengthened ties between schools and community. Studies (e.g., Kawamae & Tamai, 2005; Sodateru-Kai, 2001,) show that the program helps growth of the students themselves, encourages the exchange between urban areas and remote villages, links community building and school maintenance, and creates ties between them by receiving students from urban areas. On the other hand, problems include: 1) increased cases in which students with problems tend to be sent to the village; 2) increased number of parents that use the program as child-care facilities; 3) difficulty to find foster parents and host families due to the aging population; and, 4) lack of financial resources (financial problems at the local government). Unfortunately, many villages have abandoned the Sanson Ryugaku program as it still has problems to be solved.
The example of Kamikawa-cho also has problems with a lack of foster opportunities and funding concerns. The foster parents are now in their sixties and seventies. In addition, the number of students living near the Ochidani Elementary School this article focused on will also decrease to 42 in 2014, which is a 20% decrease from the present. The issues regarding an aging population and depopulation in the village are serious. Nevertheless, local government, residents, and school continue maintaining the Sanson Ryugaku program. Consequently, this program creates a rich educational environment by utilizing and connecting their local natural, social and cultural resources and invigorates the local community. This article explores the factors for successful results on the basis of data obtained by my fieldwork in Kamikawa-cho since 2006. Data included nine hours of observation in a dormitory for the students and three hours in school, five hours of interview with foster parents and three hours of interview with superintendent and teachers, and newsletters.

II. The Sanson Ryugaku Program in Kawakami-cho

1. The Previous System

Kamikawa-cho was established as a result of the merger of the former Kanzaki-cho and the former Okawachi-cho in November, 2005. Located in the central part of Hyogo Prefecture, in the southern-central region of Japan’s main island, it is a typical mountain village and 90% of its 202.2 square kilometers of land is forest. As its major industry “agriculture and forestry” declines, the population continues to shrink. In July 2010 the elderly accounted for 27.1% of the entire population, while the number of children declined. At the merger of two towns, two elementary schools, Ochidani No.2 Elementary in the former Kanzaki-cho and Kamioda Elementary in the former Okawachi-cho were closed. Ochidani No. 2 Elementary was integrated into No.1 Elementary and became Ochidani Elementary in 2005. The facilities left behind became Yamabiko Gakuen, a dormitory that hosts students from urban areas through the Sanson Ryugaku program, in 2007.

Ochidani No.2 Elementary School, founded in 1886, has schooled the people in the
community over three or four generations. However, the number of children considerably declined after the 1970s. In 1988, people in the two communities, Shinden and Sakuhata, which consisted the school district of No.2 Elementary, organized a community group, Ochidani Dani 2 Shougakko no Kongo wo Kangaeru Kai (Association for Thinking about the Future of Ochidani No.2 Elementary School) and started discussing measures to counteract depopulation as well as introduce the Sanson Ryugaku Program. In 1990, they organized the Committee for Promotion of the Sanson Ryugaku Program and hosted students in the school for an experiment in 1991. From the next year, they took four students through the program. During the fourteen years until its transition to Yamabiko Gakuen, 49 students came to the village through the program, enabling the school to have enough students to run three combined classes.

This previous system ran exclusively using foster parents. The kids usually lived with the foster parents for one year, and the parents were often administrative officers in the community such as a ward officer. There were various difficulties to live with children from urban areas who had different lifestyles, and the foster parents often had to sacrifice much of their free time. There was no guideline for taking students in, and the foster parents and teachers struggled to keep the program.

Why did they maintain this painstaking program? There are two reasons. First, they saw that school closure was a crucial issue that could affect the survival of the community. In the interviews of former foster parents, they uniformly answered, “We had been doing this because we felt that we would be in trouble if the school was closed” (interview, December 19, 2006). In their words, “we would be in trouble,” there is a sense of crisis in losing the basis for their life that is beyond nostalgia for their old school. In depopulated small sized schools with a small number of children, all the school events such as sports festival are made possible with support from the community. Their contribution was necessary for the survival of the school. Correspondingly, local communities also needed schools. They developed ties among people that were essential for communal living by taking part in school events with multi-generation organizations such as Kodomo-kai (the association for the children), Women’s Club, Fire Companies, and Rojin-kai (the association for the aged). Schools have been connecting people in multiple
generations and various organizations. The closure of such schools meant the loss of this function. Thus, people put much energy in keeping the elementary school alive.

The second reason is that the people actually enjoyed the program and were satisfied with the human interaction between students from urban areas. Even if they took students in just because they were in office, they eventually developed trust and love through everyday life together, as if the students were their own children. The foster parents found pleasure in corresponding with former foster children after the program ended, and they said that they felt their own development through experiencing life with urban students. Though school maintenance was their tangible purpose, the program in a way became sources of energy for the adults in the community.

The town also focused on a function of school as community organization and this energizing effect of the program. In order to run the program for a long period of time, the ward officer and members of the community organizations organized the Research Committee for Renovation of Community Exchange Center and started research and discussions. As a result, they decided to keep the program after the closure of Ochidani No.2 Elementary, to renovate the school facilities for a dormitory for the students in the program, and to outsource the program to the Sodateru-kai (the Society for Children’s Self-Development by Outdoor Activities). The Sodateru-kai gained knowhow for the Sanson Ryugaku Program since they started the similar program in Yasaka-mura in Nagano Prefecture in 1976 and has been helping the local governments and organizations by providing them with instructions for activities as well as sending their staff to the area. They are currently supporting the program in seven municipalities including kamikawa-cho (Sodateru-kai, n.d.).

2. Introduction of the Center System: the Establishment of Yamabiko Gakuen

At the establishment of the Yamabiko-Gakuen, the Sanson Ryugaku Program moved to a combined method that used the Center and home-staying with foster parents. In this new system, students from urban areas stay at the Center for 20 days in a month while for 10 other days they live with the foster parents. When this new system was introduced, two professional instructors were hired from the
Sodateru-kai in order to take care of the students at the Center. In addition, four other members are working for Yamabiko Gakuen, including a director (from the local government) and three administrative members for facilities and operation.

The new system reduced the burden of the foster parents. In the new system, the foster parents are called Nouka-san (which means farm family) by staff, and children are told to call them Mom and Dad. Before the introduction of the new system, the people who had experiences of being foster parents were concerned that “We might not be able to develop trust with the students in the combined system” and “It would be hard if children said that they liked the Center better than home staying” (interview, December 19, 2006). However, no comment like that was heard after the introduction of the new system because the new system welcomed not only children but also young professional instructors in their twenties, and people noticed the community became even livelier. The elderly population ratio decreased from 47.7% in March 2006 to 41.4% in August 2008 because the instructors moved their residents registrations to Kamikawa-cho.

The new system started with nine students. There were six boys and three girls. The second group consisted of twelve students, including six continuing students, and among them eight were boys and four were girls. Their hometowns varied from Hyogo Prefecture where the Kamikawa-cho is located and to other nearby prefectures such as Osaka and Kyoto. Half of the students were only children in their family. The students in the program lived in four spaces: the Center, the farmhouse, and the community, and the school. Activities in the Center and the farmhouse were varied.

The weekday schedule at the Center was as follows. Getting up at 5:30 in the morning, students go to school before seven o’clock after having breakfast. The distance between the school and the Center is about six kilometers, and they go by car for the first three kilometers and then walk the rest of the way. When they come back from school, they walk the first three kilometers with other local students, go by car for two kilometers, and then walk the last one kilometer to the Center. At the Center, people call this way back from school Michikusa Time, which means loitering time, while the school called it time for exploring the nature. Despite the gap in educational principles between the Center and the school, this time of walking back to the Center is precious time both for children and local residents.
The students pick many horsetails in spring, and the local people generously give the children sweet potatoes, cabbages, and persimmons from their field and backyard. For children, it is a time for communicating with local residents, and the local people also look forward to it.

The students have to do their own tasks such as laundry, cleaning, and preparing meals. There is no television or games. The younger children call the older ones Sister X and Brother Y, and the continuing students help new students as experienced senior students. One of the educational pillars of the Sodateru-kai is agriculture. Thus, children take part in growing rice and vegetables by learning from local farmers. The Sodateru-kai emphasizes doing by hands. By learning the process of rice production and by physically experiencing its tough work, the students can appreciate the work of farmers who produce food more deeply and enjoy the harvest and the seasonal food with their senses. The program emphasizes this whole process of experience.

What did the students think about the program? We can see from the essays written by the students that they gradually built self-confidence in overcoming their unfamiliar new life and loneliness of being apart from home:

I hated everything. I had to get up early in the morning, took so much time to eat, and did my laundry by myself. We often fought each other and I felt weird when I got scolded by someone other than my parents. However, I got used to my new life by May and we became friends. For example, washing dishes; At the beginning, I had to do it all over again because it was still slippery, but now I can finish washing dishes quickly. Next, squeezing towels; I am the best at it now. (a fifth grade boy ,November 2007)

The instructors from the Sodateru-kai play an important role and they keep supporting children. The superintendent reported about the instructors:

They are thought to be less experienced, however, they were brilliant in teaching kids. Their way in which they discuss patiently with children, wait for their understanding and eventually allow the kids to decide themselves was wonderful. Thus, the children became independent and developed even more (Newsletter, March 2008).

The instructors in their twenties gave fresh perspective to the students and to the educators in the community.
Ⅲ. Factors to utilize local resources: programs and hub

Transitioning from the previous system to the new system, the students from urban areas lived with diverse people from different ages and positions such as the students of other ages, the local children, the instructors, the staff at the Center, their foster parents, school teachers, and the local residents. In addition, there are various kinds of things and events around them that can bridge the students and others. The natural environment and the production activities that are based on it | seasonal outdoor activities, local festivals, agricultural works, fruits, herbs, living creatures in the backyard of the farmhouse | are all integrated into the program at the Center. The Sanson Ryugaku Program is a fruit of the things, events, and people. The activities that utilize local resources, the people, organizations and administration that support them all crystallized in the Sanson Ryugaku program. The Center functioned as a hub to create multi-layered, plural connections and relationships with people and nature centering on the students.

The harvest festival is held in November of each year. The children and adults from Shinden and Sakuhata, students from urban areas, their parents, and school staff get together and have a performance, tasting party, and social gathering. It is one of the highlights of the program. The students from urban areas play Japanese drums and performed the Haneko Odori, a traditional dance that celebrates harvests. The drums are performed with the local children. About the first event, the superintendent commented:

I was moved to tears when I watched them lowering their posture and drumming so powerfully. I felt a sense of unity in their concentrated efforts of drumming that was formed through living under the same roof and eating together, and the strong ties among them. I was pleased to see the local kids joining them because it is the starting point of our exchange (Newsletter, December 2007).

We also heard similar comments about the children in the event from the principal of Ochidani Elementary and the foster parents. Seeing the growth of their kids during the first six months of the program, the adults also strengthened their unity and shared the joy.

The foster parents accepted the children from urban areas without any prior interview or information about their developmental history. Thus, in the beginning of
the program, it was often the case that the foster parents found it difficult to build a good relationship with their kid, having negative impressions such as “He seems like a difficult kid with no facial expression” or “We don’t know what she is thinking about” (interview, October 23, 2007). However, as the foster parents lived with kid under the same roof, they gradually started feeling affection towards them. They started missing them, waiting for them, and eventually got moved to tears at the drumming performance of the kids. We need to understand that the energy that the children gave out when they grow invigorated the people around them and gave them pleasure. It is the energy from children that united the power of the local people and enabled them to keep the program, even after the school closure.

Ochidani Elementary school, which accepted students from urban areas, is registered as a remote district school, and there are 61 students and 14 teachers working there (as of 2008). The school district consists of five local communities, and has a close relationship with them. Their school newspaper is distributed to all 400 households through the ward mayor. The principal and the vice-principal strive to accept students through the program and even stay overnight at the Center to commute with them. The school teachers and administrators acknowledge that there are some disagreements in educational principles with the Sodateru-kai. For example, regarding the loitering time, it is difficult for the school administrators to officially allow students to loiter on their way back home because they are responsible for the safety of the students. However, by calling it time for exploring, the school flexibly cooperates with the Sodateru-kai. It is not always necessary to have a single, coherent educational principle. The important thing is to construct good relationships with the growth of the children from multiple standpoints.

Ⅳ. Conclusion

How to deal with the decline of school-aged children has become an emergent issue for small-size local governments. The Sanson Ryugaku program in Kamikawa-cho is an example of addressing this problem by focusing on a function of schools as community organization. This example shows that it is possible for a depopulated mountain village to create a rich educational environment by utilizing
and connecting their local natural, social, and cultural resources. Kamikawa-cho was successful in recombining the energies and hopes that the people had been putting into the previous system by getting the knowhow from the Sodateru-kai and by reusing the former school facilities as a dormitory for the students in the Sanson Ryugaku program. In sum, this example suggests that there are two success factors: the programs and a hub which could make full use of local resources.

References


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