CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

EDUCATION IN THE AGED SOCIETY: THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGE TO JAPANESE EDUCATION

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1. Introduction

The story of how Japan’s third post-war baby boom never materialised is well known and is told elsewhere in this volume. The effect on the Japanese education system of the shrinking of the number, both in absolute and in relative terms, of children in the Japanese population is much less well-known and forms the subject of this chapter.

The number of children attending the compulsory six-year elementary (shōgakkō) school system peaked first in 1958 at around 13.5 million, then declined again by over 3 million over the next decade, before peaking a second time at 11.9 million in 1981, since when the number of children in the sector has continuously declined to around 7.2 million in 2004 and will continue to decline in future years as its mirrors the declining national birth-rate. As one would expect, the same story can be seen as the cohort of children moved through the compulsory three-year junior high school (chūgakkō) sector which peaked first in 1962 at around 7.3 million, then declined by over 1.2 million over the next decade before peaking a second time at 6.1 million in 1986 since when the number of children in the sector has continuously declined to around 3.66 million in 2004, a drop in eighteen years of over 40 per cent.

This demographic shift has had a number of major effects on the compulsory school system. Interestingly, for example, while the number of schools has reduced over the past four decades, this has not been by the same proportion as the number of pupils taught in them. The number of elementary schools, for example, peaked in 1957 at 26,988 and fell back to 23,420 in 2004, a decline of only 13.2 per cent. The main reason for this was that class sizes have become much smaller although they remain some way above the OECD average: average
sizes in elementary schools were 45 in 1952, 34 in 1986 and 26 in 2004; in junior high schools, they were 46 in 1955, 38 in 1987 and 31 in 2004. Almost all of the education in the compulsory sector of the education system up to the age of fifteen is delivered through the public system—only around 1 per cent of pupils in elementary school and 6.5 per cent of pupils in junior high schools receive private education—and the government kept rigidly to its commitment to principles of equality and meritocracy which sometimes meant that schools were kept open in outlying rural areas which had only two or three children in them. In Suginami Ward in Tokyo, the local government did experiment in the 1990s with a British system which allowed parents to determine which elementary school their children attended and for the local authority to close down unpopular schools on the basis that it was the parents and not the local government which had implicitly made this decision, but in most areas the policy was to reduce the number of children in schools rather than to merge or rationalise the local system as a whole. The contraction in both the number of schools and pupils also meant that fewer new appointments were needed and that—combined with the fact that the teaching profession offered a relatively high status and good salary compared to graduates of a similar background—has led to the average age of teachers increasing: for elementary school teachers in 2004, it was almost 44, while the figure for those in junior schools it was around 42. Older teachers and smaller classes have meant that spending per student has risen by around 25 per cent over the past decade (OECD 2005: 4–5).

The effect of the declining number of children in the education system on senior high schools has been slightly more complicated than on the lower levels of the system. There are two reasons for this. The first is that this system is not compulsory and many of the first baby boom generation were leaving the education system at the age of fifteen at the first opportunity which was available at that period. The number of those attending senior high school did not peak, therefore, until 1989 when around 94 per cent of those leaving middle schools continued into senior high school and the second baby boom generation passed through the system with 5.64 million children attending senior high schools across Japan. Since 1989, the number of those in senior high school has dropped rapidly to around 3.72 million in 2004 (a drop of 34 per cent over 15 years). The other complicating factor is the role of private education. At senior high school level in Japan around 30 per cent of schools are private. Many of these schools were established in the 1950s and 1960s to meet the expanding demand for education