THE EFFECT OF FLEXIBLE POLICY ON A PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT: A CASE STUDY IN JAPAN*

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Introduction:
The Japanese Educational System and Recent Education Reform

The 1990s in Japan brought developments in education reform based on Neo-liberalism. The policy of ‘devolution’ — decision-making from central government to the local government and from the Local Education Board to the individual school — is one of the important factors of this reform.

However, when we try to compare the process in Japan with that of other countries, we need to consider the unique character of the Japanese educational system and recent education reform in Japan. The characteristics are as follows:

1) Strong control of the educational system through a central bureaucracy

Since the Meiji era the central bureaucratic control over the educational system has been particularly strong. Even after W.W.II, when the Local Education Board was formally established, strong central control continued. Even today the central bureaucratic control is evident as seen in these examples:

a) Japanese National Curriculum has been very rigid and has regulated each school curriculum in detail. It regulates the “what” and “how” of school knowledge for each form at the primary and secondary levels. This includes the enforcement to hoist the national flag, “Hinomaru”, and to sing the national anthem, “Kimigayo”, at every school entrance or graduation ceremony.

b) The upper level of the educational bureaucracy has the right to guide and suggest to the lower level including each school concerning any issues. This “guidance” has substantially meant “directions”.

c) When the Chief Secretary of the Local Education Board is appointed, the appointment must be approved by the upper level of the bureaucracy, for the prefectural government by the central government, and for the municipality by the prefecture.

d) Political activity of public school teachers is rigidly restricted, such as, the prohibition of a strike and the prohibition of stirring up other staff members to political action, etc.

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Recently, some of these enforcements have been evaluated for modification or discontinuation in the context of the recent education reform. Therefore, the recent devolution policy means not only promoting the marketization and the competition among schools, but also the democratic correction of the over-regulating character of the central government.

2) Continued Bureaucratic Control with Limited Deregulation

Central and local bureaucrats don't resign their vested interests easily. Then the recent devolution policy in education must necessarily become no thorough ongoing one and I will examine the mechanism of the compromising processes.

Characteristics of 1) and 2) are summarised in figure 1.

**Figure 1. Three Directions in Opposition to Each Other in the Field of Education Reform**

(1) State Bureaucratic Control
- regulation of people, money and materials
- rigid National Curriculum

(2) De-regulation and Marketization
- parental choice
- cutting down the budget
- from equality to differentiation

(3) Participation and (Local or School) Autonomy
- school autonomy with participation of students, parents, community and school staff
- Community Education Forum

The first direction in the field of education reform is "State Bureaucratic Control" (SBC), which means the strict regulation of people, money, and materials by the central educational bureaucracy and also the existence of a rigid national curriculum. This direction is supported by conservative politicians and central and local bureaucrats (including school management) within the educational system.

The second direction is "De-regulation and Marketization" (DM), which insists on parental choice and competition among schools with cuts in the national budget for schools. It also promotes changes in the concept of public education from equality to differentiation. The agents of DM are business circles, neo-liberal bureaucrats, and the right wing of the urban middle class.

The third direction is "Participation and (Local or School) Autonomy" (PLSA), which means school autonomy created through the participation of students, parents, community
and school staff. Such school autonomy is not oriented to the market, but the democracy of community. The PLSA position is assumed by the left wing of the urban middle class and the labor class. Teachers’ unions are opposed to both the first and the second directions, traditionally to SBC and recently to DM. The third (PLSA) is their adopted position, but until now the majority of the members have not taken a positive attitude towards the participation of students, parents and the community in schools.

3) The need for change in the emphasis on competition and other problematic areas

School education in Japan is now beset by many problems — over-heated competition, disruptive pupils, the breakdown of order of school classes, a lack of motivation to learn, bullying, truancy, etc. Every movement in education reform is required to seek solutions to these problems. So the three directions in Figure 1 become even more opposed as each attempts to solve the problems in its own way, and each is tested by the people whether it will be able to contribute to solving and softening these problems.

In this paper, I will focus on one case in the Tokyo Metropolitan area, analyzing the three directions of reform in terms of the process and mechanisms of the opposition and compromise.

I. The Introduction to “Flexible School District” Policy at C Ward

C Ward is located in the east side of Tokyo and maintains 76 primary and 39 junior high municipal schools. A flexible policy on public primary and junior high schools was originally suggested by the government’s circular (Ministry of Education, 1987), and in several circulars in the 1990s proposing allowing bullied pupils to change their schools. In 1995 the Education Board of C Ward introduced a flexible policy for the school district, the most flexible one at that time.

C Ward is one of 23 special Wards in Tokyo. Since each special ward has similar local authority compatible to a city, it has its own Education Board. The east side of Tokyo, where C Ward is located, is in the down town area. The population of C Ward has been holding at about 600,000 for twenty five years. The rate of the primary industry in terms of the number of people at work is only 0.4% (in 1995), while that of secondary industry is 34.5%, which is rather high for the average rate in Japan, and the third industry is 62.6%.

Although it is difficult to identify the social class proportions, one of the characteristic features of C Ward is that there are a lot of small sized factories. Of about 9,000 factories, 85% of them are those of less than 10 workers. And among 36,000 offices, 87% of them are also those of less than 10 workers. Therefore, the distinct features of the C Ward area, in terms of social classes, are a large number of factory workers, a high rate of small size enterprises, and a relatively small middle class.

In autumn 1995, the Education Board of C Ward developed a new ‘Standard for Dealing with the School Designation’ According to the Standard, there are 22 items allowed for a change in the designated school, not only in case of being bullied but also in situations involving distance from home to school, children and parental illnesses, moving, both parents
working, etc. This means that, if parents want to change their designated school for their child, there is an 'open enrollment' system which uses this Standard.

Here I should explain the outline of the school district system in Japan. Although there is no limitation about private school districts, there are set rules in the public school districts. The rules of primary and junior secondary levels are different from those of the senior secondary level. Concerning the latter, each prefecture decides the school district and so students or parents can choose one from several public high schools. But at the primary and junior secondary levels, which is compulsory education, the Local Education Board of each region designates one school for the child according to his/her address. So each public school at this level has its own school district, ordinarily not overlapped with any other school at the same level, as seen in the figures which follow. But even though parents are supposed to send their children to designated schools at the primary and junior high school levels, some do not and instead engage in the illegal practice called "Ekkyo" (attending another school outside the district). Therefore this flexible school district policy may, in a sense, help to legalize Ekkyo.

Compared with the ordinary rules, we can understand that the flexible school district policy introduced by C Ward Education Board was the most flexible and freest one three years ago.

II. Results of the Flexible Policy in 1998 - 'Over' and 'Under' Enrollments

We can see the results of this flexible policy through the April 1998 data. Figure 2 shows the situation of the number of enrollments in junior high school - over or less when compared with the number of children designated to the school - on 1st April 1998. There are four junior high schools with over 120% of the originally expected number of students (the highest rate is 187.5% of "A" Junior High School). And there are also four schools with less than 80% (the lowest rate is 43.4% of "H" Junior High School).

Figure 3 shows the situations of primary schools at the same time. There are nine primary schools with enrollments over 120% (the highest rate is 158.7% of "a" Primary School). And

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Figure 2. The Situations of the Number of Enrollments in Junior High Schools — 'Over' or 'Less' When Compared with the Number of Children Who Are Designated to Each School — in April 1998, C Ward
FIGURE 3. THE SITUATION OF THE NUMBER OF ENROLLMENTS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS — 'OVER' OR 'LESS' WHEN COMPARED WITH THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN WHO ARE DESIGNATED TO EACH SCHOOL — IN APRIL 1998, C WARD

- the location of school building
- the boundary of school district

158.7% (a)

129.1% (b), 127.3% (c), 126.1% (d), 124.5% (e), 123.9% (f)

123.4% (g), 121.7% (h), 120.5% (i)

80～120%

78.9% (j), 78.8% (k), 77.2% (l), 77.0% (m), 76.9% (n)

71.1% (o), 70.3% (p), 68.4% (q), 63.3% (r)

57.6% (s), 44.1% (t)

Over Enrollments

Less Enrollments

<The quotient> is calculated as follows:

\[
\left( \frac{\text{the real number of entrants to each school in April 1998}}{\text{the original number of children who are designated to each school}} \right) \times 100 \, (\%) 
\]
there are 11 schools with less than 80% (the lowest rate is 44.1% of "t" Primary School).

According to our survey, these 'over enrolled schools' and 'less enrolled schools' have some distinctive features which are summarized on Table 1.

Particularly at the junior high level, most of the 'over enrolled schools' have traditionally had a high reputation and these schools are large in size. In contrast, all of the schools with the below average enrollment are geographically next to the high reputation schools and have a relatively low reputation because of disruptive pupils and their small size.

At the primary level, the situation is influenced directly by that of the junior secondary level. Other features of most of the 'less enrolled primary schools' are their location next to the high reputation primary school and their small size. There was a rumor that a small sized school would be combined with another causing the smaller school to close. This influenced the parents to consider not sending their children to a school which might close. The 'flexible policy' apparently has created a hierarchy among neighboring public schools.

III. Comments on Results

1) The concentration of difficulties at the 'less enrolled school': the case of 'H' Junior High School

In the school district of 'H' Junior High School (H-JH) there are three primary schools, but only a few graduates of two primary schools attend H-JH. Before graduation, information was spread that a pupil, considered to be a bully and disruptive, would enter H-JH, causing many of the parents made applications to change the designated school. What occurred within H-JH?

The Principal of H-JH responded to our questions as follows:

- Once a school is labeled as "a school with problems", the atmosphere of the school becomes dark and hopeless.
- The number of new entrants decreases while the rate of pupils who have some difficulties (ex: lower academic ability, disruptiveness, truancy, etc.) increases.
- Daily school life is difficult, as if it were a war zone. Almost everyday there are occurrences of disruption in the school environment and cases of pupil violence.
- Within one year, six pupils were sent to the Juvenile Classification Office or a reformatory.
- All staff of this school are opposing the 'flexible policy' of the school district.
- We, all of the staff of this school, make twice the effort compared with that of other ordinary schools, but such efforts are not always effective and do not achieve expected results.

We find that the difficulties of education are more and more concentrated at H-JH and the school reputation just gets worse.

2) Promoting parents' participation at a 'less enrolled school': the case of 't' Primary School

From February to March 1997, a group of parents and neighboring residents of 't'
Primary School (t-P) met several times because the number of new entrants for the next academic year was so small (only three) when compared with the designated number. They called the officer of Local Education Board to the Community Assembly Hall and made a protest against its 'flexible policy'. They questioned, "Why do we worry about letting our children enter into the school which you designated? We do not have to." Eventually, 10 children entered the school (p.s.: 15 in April 1998). Parents of these children are extraordinarily active in participating in school activities and in the decision making process about these activities. They demanded that the school staff do attractive activities for their children at school which might be good use of the small size of the school.

Consequently, many activities were developed: one or two special events held by the school almost every month, involving parents and the community as follows:

- Music concert in school gymnasium attended by pupils, parents, and neighboring residents.
- Camp fire on school playground with parents.
- Putting up a lot of carp streamers on school playground with the help of community people.
- An association of fathers was organized and some of its members made a Monster House in the school building. One summer evening pupils entered the Monster House to test their courage. This in Japan is one of the popular amusements in summer.
- Pupils planted pansy seeds in school flowerbeds and they sent the flowers to nursery schools and other public institutions in the community.
- There was a grand marathon meeting in winter.
- There was a grand kite-flying meeting at the beginning of the year.
- Lunch was held under the blue sky on the bank of Arakawa River just beside the school.
- And some others.

The choice to remain at the designated school might make the parents more beware of their own rights to require 'the accountability' of the school. Such active involvement and awareness have not been observed among the parents who chose the other schools in place of their designated school.

3) The reconsideration of the 'flexible policy' by the Education Board

Protests against the 'flexible policy' were made not only by some parents and communities but also by many school managers and staff. Why are many of the school staff opposing the policy? If they work at a school with a low reputation, we can easily understand their opposition, as in the case of H-JH.

But in fact, in C Ward, there was another aim of the flexible policy, and that was to prevent the 'brain drain' from public schools at C Ward to private schools or other wards' public schools through establishing schools with a higher reputation. In the case of 'C' Junior High School(131.7% of enrollment rate in April 1998), the academic results of the school declined and so did the reputation. Changing the designate school is executed through the application of parents with the approval at the window of the Education Board Office. Thus each school does not touch its process. Each school cannot select the entrants. The Principal
of C-JH commented in our interview that since the flexible policy was adopted, there has been an increase in the problematic students and a decrease in the capable students.

Staff members from schools that have a rather high reputation are also negative toward the flexible policy.

These protests encourage the conservative bureaucrats of the Education Board who want to recover their control over the designation of school districts. In June 1998 the Education Board of C Ward decided to re-evaluate the flexible policy. This assessment is still ongoing and the Standard is still alive, but since the decision was made, the clerks at the window of the Education Board Office have become stricter with parents who request a change in their designated schools. The Standard does not mean that students and parents have the right to choose their school, but that the range of discretion is left to the bureaucracy of education.

Conclusion: An Analysis of the Three Reform Directions and the Consideration of the Social Class Influences

Here I would like to refer to the social class influences over the choice situations. As we have seen, the schools with lower enrollment are commonly small size. The reason for this is not only the effect of the flexible policy, but also the location of public housing development apartments in these school districts. Municipal housings in Japan is not always good and is usually assigned to people with low incomes. The population of C Ward increased threefold from the end of W.W.II to the 1970s when most public housing apartments were built. During the early years, there were a lot of children in these apartments, but after two or three decades, the number of children has decreased. So the small size of the less enrolled school is also a result of being in the low income public apartments with fewer children.

Thus the flexible policy has not only made a hierarchy among neighboring public schools but it has also recalled the traditional consciousness of discrimination in the area. Therefore, it has constructed the hierarchy not randomly but based on recalling and expanding historical discrimination.

Another feature of the social class influence is in the choice of private schools. The average rate of private school enrollments in Tokyo is about 15%. In C Ward the rate is about 10%. Although this is not high compared with that of other wards, it might be true that many of the upper middle class parents select private schools for their children.

We have seen three directions taken in education reform and the specific agents involved in each. The process of opposition and compromise among them is very complex. The formal documents of the Government, that show the orientation of the recent education reform, seem to be based on DM(The Central Advisory Council for Education, 1996,1997,1998; Ministry of Education, 1997). But it is not absolute as we see in this case study.

The flexible school district policy introduced at C Ward was much freer in nature at that time. However, the Education Board bureaucrats did not entirely surrender their position to regulate the school district and in fact they were repulsive to the tendencies to increase parents’ rights of both choice and participation. The introduction of the flexible policy itself showed a lukewarm commitment. Other cases in Japan are also similar.

Reviewing the policy is, on the one hand, the result of the democratic movements by parents, the community and teachers union, but on the other hand, it means the revival of bureaucratic control over education.
It is my opinion that there has been ‘a tug of war’ between the first and the second directions (SBC and DM), for even in the age of education reform, where the bureaucrats seek to keep their vested interests in store. We see in Japan some compromised educational policies, that is, “Devolution but not with Participation” or “Parental Choice but not their Rights”. I think that the third direction (PLSA) is necessarily opposed to both the first (SBC) and the second (DM), and it has to seek a new democratic association which will promote the participation and awareness of parents and the community. Geoff Whitty, in his book (1998), states: “We now need to experiment with and evaluate new forms of association in the public sphere within which citizen rights in education policy can be reasserted against current trends towards both a restricted and authoritarian version of the state and marketized civil society.” People who are seriously concerned with educational reform in Japan need to consider this.

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