
第 4 章

The Impact of Sanson-Ryugaku on the Participating Students and Local Community

-The Case of Namiai, Achi Village-

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山村留学による受け入れコミュニティと参加児童への影響： 阿智村浪合地区の事例を用いて

<要約>

調査背景

現在日本では、都会の子供が両親と離れて比較的長い期間山間部に住み、地元の学校に通う山村留学という制度が過疎化の進んだ地域で積極的に行われている。2008年度には全国97市町村で677名の小中学生が山村留学を経験した。山村留学の効果としては、文部科学省が推進している“いきるちから”を養うための教育機会として、また都会での生活によってストレスを被っている子供達のための癒しの場としての教育的効果が期待される。また、過疎地域における地域活性化の手段としても山村留学の効果が注目を集めている。阿智村浪合地区では1983年よりNPO法人「なみあい育遊会」が主体となって山村留学を行っており、現在既に100名以上の小中学生がこの山村留学制度を経験している。現在は14名の子供達がこの山村留学に参加しており、寮で共同生活を営み浪合学校で地元児童と共に学んでいる。

調査目的

山村留学が受け入れコミュニティと参加児童に利益・問題点を含めどのような影響を及ぼしているのか、またどのようにしてそれらの影響が起きているのかを検証する。

調査方法

阿智村教育委員会教育次長、阿智村役場浪合支所長、NPO「なみあい育遊会」理事長含めスタッフの方3名、地元児童の保護者の方2名、地元の方2名へのインタビュー、山村留学児童保護者の方9名への郵送によるアンケートを実施した。

調査結果

調査を通して、山村留学制度は受け入れコミュニティ・参加児童双方へ大きな利益を与えていることが分かった。浪合地区で行われている山村留学が利益を生み出している土台として山村留学児童の積極的な態度、山村留学児童をコミュニティの一員として見るコミュニティ側の対応が挙げられる。山村留学児童は、様々な農業・自然活動・地元行事等に積極的に参加しており、少子化が進んでいる浪合地区においては貴重な活力の源となっている。このように参加児童が行動的な理由としては、児童を選ぶ際のNPOの選考基準に子供が山村留学に対して明確な目的意識を持っているという条件が含まれていること、また実施団体であるNPOの山村留学に対する目的のひとつが地域の活性化であることが考えられる。加えて、地域住民も山村留学児童を外部者としてではなく、地域住民の一員と見ることで双方に有益な関係が築かれている。浪合区域においては山村留学児童受け入れ校である浪合学校を中心に、学校を中心とした地域活性化を図る運動が既に存在しており山村留学児童を積極的に受け入れるための意識的土台はできていた様である。しかし、山村留学によって生み出される利益のほとんどは精神的なものが多くはっきりと目に見えるものではないため、世間ではあまり知られておらず、良い評価がされていないのではないだろうか。

また、山村留学制度は自然豊かな地域での生活の利点について改めて考え直す機会となっている。

地元住民は山村留学関係者の自然への積極的な働きかけを見ることで、日々の生活の中で慣れてしまった周辺環境の重要さに改めて気付くことができる。また、山村留学参加者の中には、山村留学を通して自然が豊かな地域の教育的効果に気づき、子どもの教育のために浪合区域に引っ越してきた家族もいた。

過疎化は当該地域における深刻な問題であるが、山村留学は、山間部での自然豊かな地域における教育効果に注目を集めるきっかけとなりうるため、過疎の解消へ貢献することができるのではないだろうか。都市部に住む人々の中には既にその教育効果に注目している人々もいるが、該当地域での保護者のための就労機会の不足、子供が高等教育機関に進学する際の不安等から実際に移住をすることはできないと考えている人もいる。移住促進のためには、移住を考える人々のニーズに合ったより効果的で現実的な手段が求められる。

また山村留学の将来的な課題としては、経済面を含め持続可能性を維持するために、今後どのように参加児童人数、実施地域を広げていくかが重要である。調査を通してインタビュー・アンケートを行ったすべての人々が山村留学のもたらす利益を理解していることがわかったが、金銭的な面での持続可能性には疑問がある。阿智村が山村留学に対して払っている補助金は全体的支出と比較しても決して少ないものではない。しかし、実際の山村留学運営費は厳しいものであるため、民間部門を含めた山村留学の規模拡大が望まれる。また、今後浪合学校は阿智村に合併されるため、阿智村他地域の支持・理解が不可欠である。加えて、参加児童を国内のみならず海外からも募集することも可能である。前述のNPOは現在サマーキャンプ等で海外留学生を受け入れているが、長期的に山村留学でも外国人児童を受け入れるのは、特に農業技術の発達しているこの地域においては有効なのではないだろうか。

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1. INTRODUCTION

1-1. Background

1-1-1. General background of the Village

In Japan, there are many villages which are suffering from depopulation and related problems. 732 out of 1,789 villages and cities are designated as “depopulating areas” by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication of Japan (MIC, 2008). These places have some serious problems such as the scarcity of young people, the disproportionate number of senior citizens, unequal access to educational opportunities, the loss of local culture and the deactivation of local industry (Thompson, 2003; MIC, 2008). *Namiai* area¹ is one of these regions and it is facing various difficulties, including school related issues such as a decrease in student numbers, the closing or merging of schools, a lack of teachers and facilities.

1-1-2. The Sanson-Ryugaku Program

Sanson-Ryugaku is a program where elementary or junior high school students from urban areas can stay and study in rural areas without their parents for relatively longer periods of time compared to summer camps conducted in other countries. This kind of program was offered in 97 villages and cities of Japan in 2008 and 677 children participated in them (*Zenkoku Sanson-Ryugaku Kyokai*, n.d.). Currently, *Sanson-Ryugaku* has received increasing amounts of attentions because of its effects on revitalizing remote areas and solving educational problems. Community revitalization is the primary goal for the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program offered in *Namiai*. With regards to the role of revitalization of unpopulated areas, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) noticed the benefits produced by conducting *Sanson-Ryugaku* in the villages where agriculture is the main industry. Tamai (2003, pp.13) raised three reasons why *Sanson-Ryugaku* has been recently emphasized even by MAFF. Tamai indicates the revitalization of farming villages cannot be achieved only by agricultural output and needs more comprehensive methods including educational and cultural activities to challenge this serious issue. The second reason he raised is the usage of agricultural land should not be limited to farming itself and should be utilized for active learning programs through agricultural experiences to promote understanding in the importance of agriculture. Eventually this can contribute to an increase in the number of people who are engaged in farming. And finally, tackling the problem of youth such as stay-at-home, “parasite single” or moratorium children, which cause a reduction in the work force is the one of the important roles of *Sanson-Ryugaku* that he expresses. In addition, one of the expected educational roles of *Sanson-Ryugaku* is to provide “healing” opportunities for children who have some educational problems such as truancy, difficulties in relationships with classmates or learning disabilities (Kawamae & Tamai, 1997; Nakamori, Wada & Tokunaga, 1998). It gives children the opportunities to attain “*Ikiru Chikara*” (The power to live) which has been emphasized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology (MEXT).

¹ *Namiai* is one of the areas of *Achi* village, which used to be an independent village and was merged to *Achi* village in 2005 (*Achi Village Administration*, 2005).



Source: Authors

1-1-3. NPO “*Namiai Ikuyukai*”

Presently, 14 children from urban areas are participating in the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program in *Namiai* village. They live in a dormitory camp house which belongs to the Non Profit Organization “*Namiai Ikuyukai*” throughout their participation period in the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program while attending the local elementary and junior high school. This program has accepted more than 100 children since its establishment in 1983. In 1992, the program was cancelled² however due to requests from community members’ *Namiai* village was reinstated as a participating community (*Namiai Ikuyukai*, n.d.). This program was first initiated by the former *Namiai* village administration. At that time, *Namiai* was an independent village instead of a subordinate part of *Achi* village. The village administration has entrusted the *Sanson-Ryugaku* project to the NPO and the NPO was responsible for running the affairs of the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program. Currently, the budget of approximately 13 million for this program and is one third of the NPO’s annual budget. It is transferred to the NPO *Namiai Ikuyukai* as a subsidy to the *Namiai* area. The village administration does not interfere in the administrative affairs of the NPO and *Namiai* School is the only educational institution in the area which receives students from the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program. Another interesting activity organized by the NPO is a summer camp for Japanese students from urban areas and foreign students from other countries to stay in *Namiai* area for a short period. It has accepted some international

² Neither members of the NPO, nor pamphlets issued by the NPO clearly mentioned reasons why the NPO suspended the program for a certain period. The answer given to the research group was simply “as a result of personal situations” (*Namiai Ikuyukai*, n.d.).

students from overseas and they put emphasis on international understanding.³ One of the characteristics of the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program offered here is their motto which is to contribute and activate the local community including the school. This shows that the NPO is not focused on dealing with educational problems caused by the current educational situation in urban areas, which is the one of the objectives of *Sanson-Ryugaku* raised by Tamai (2003). Along with this motto, the program selects children who desire to study in nature-filled environments in the *Namiai* area. Therefore, it does not primarily aim to either support children with mental or educational learning disabilities or solve these problems through *Sanson-Ryugaku*. The approach of the NPO in contributing to the local community and school can be observed through their method of accepting children after considering which grades in *Namiai* School will become multi-graded in the following year. The group's research in *Namiai* noticed the awareness of community members on the contribution of *Sanson-Ryugaku* to the local community including the local school. Thus, it is significant that the recipient community is positively influenced from the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program as well as the participating children who receive various benefits from living in the local community.

1-1-4. *Namiai* School

As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Namiai* School accepts children from the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program. There is no written agreement between the NPO "*Namiai Ikuyukai*" and the *Namiai* School, still they occasionally meet to exchange their opinions. The NPO does the advertisement, recruitment and selection of *Sanson-Ryugaku* students. Although the school is not involved in any of the process, Mr. Yoshida who is the president of the NPO said "We have a good relationship".

The school was established in 1872 and the current building was re-designed by a famous architect, Yuzawa Masanobu in 1988 (*Namiai* village, 1991). The school was built with spaciousness in mind yet its actual student capacity is only approximately 90-100 students and the majority of space is used for facilities like the canteen,⁴ halls, corridors and playgrounds for extra-curricular activities. The building's design is made specifically with larger windows and open classrooms spaces to promote the concept of "Open School" philosophy. The approach of the open school philosophy is "to allow students their own methods of learning at their own rate of speed in areas of their own choosing" (Cockerham & Blevins, 1976, pp.165). Ozawa (n.d.) criticized that in some cases, the concept of "open-school" is not fully understood nor conceptualized among teachers and only the building with open spaces were built. The principal of *Namiai* School maintained the same opinion. He stated that there are rooms for community members to gather and organize various types of events; unfortunately people of the community do not take advantage of the role that the rooms were originally designed for. As the population

³ Two children in 1994, one in 1997, and one in 1998 from Miami State, U.S.A. participated in the program. In 2004, members had intercultural events with some students from Russia. They had some Japanese American from New York in their summer camp as well (*Namiai Ikuyukai*, n.d.).

⁴ The canteen is large and not only the students from the elementary and junior high school but also the kindergarten (located next to the school) can have school lunch together in the same space.

decreases and the number of students similarly drops, the building is too large for the current number of 79 students and at the same time it is too large for school staff to effectively clean and heat in winter.⁵

The teachers expressed their efforts to include more practical components in their teaching and it assists students in realizing the rich nature and their own abilities in doing many things on their own such as farming, planting vegetables and cooking. This also allows them to build closer relationships with the environment and nature.⁶



Source: Authors

1-2. Research Objectives

The main research objective is to identify the benefits and problems of the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program on participating children from urban areas to join the program and the local community: local students, their parents, and *Namiai* School in *Achi* Village. The research group will examine the current and future problems this program is encountering in achieving its objectives.

⁵ According to the interview with the school principal, Mr. Sasaki

⁶ One of the researchers' observed classes was the *Yaki-imo* – baked potato as one of the integrated class. The students of first and six grades learnt how to raise potato through previous classes and in that class outside the school building they made *Yaki-imo* over a fire together.

1-3. Research Question

Based on the above mentioned research objective, the study group has set the following research questions:

1. What are the benefits of the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program and how does it benefit the participating students and the community including the local school, students, parents, and the entire village.
2. What are the problems for the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program and how does it affect the participating students and the community including the local school, students, parents, and the entire village.

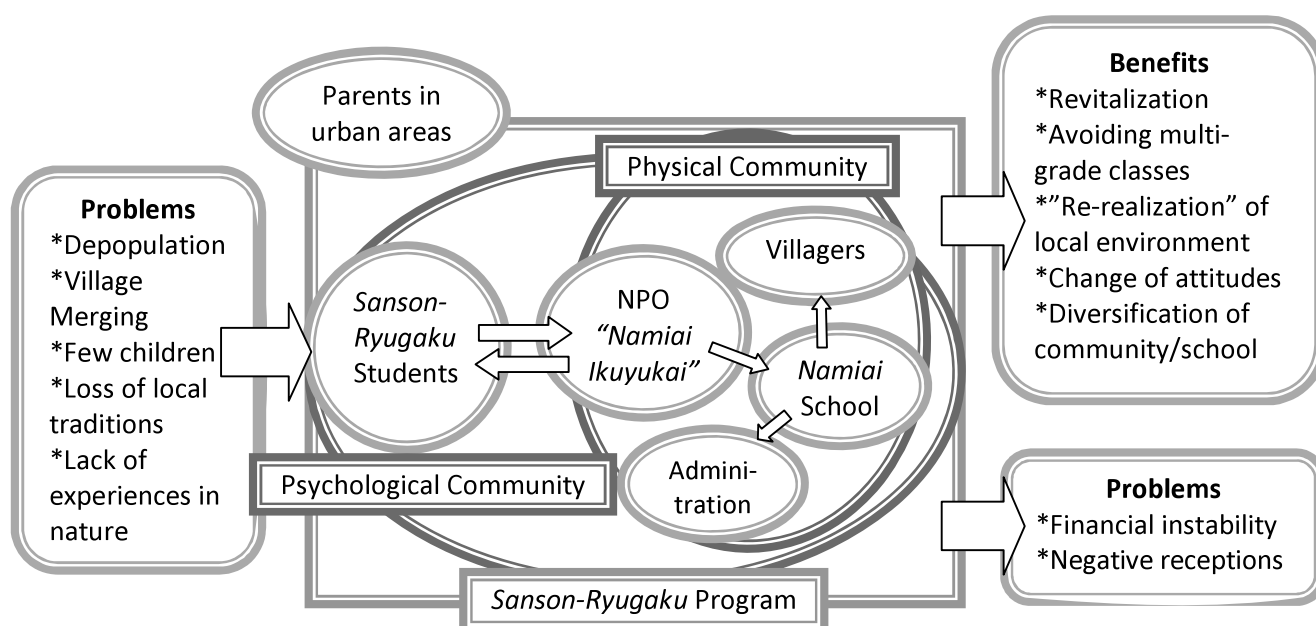
1-4. Research Methodology

Literature review on the subject included a review of websites of related organizations, booklets, reports and various articles regarding the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program throughout Japan. After identifying the stakeholders of this program, the research group decided to interview a majority of them outside of the parents of the *Sanson-Ryugaku* students. Since the parents live in urban cities far from the *Namiai* village where their children are living and studying, a written questionnaire was provided for their opinions. The interviewees were the leader and two staff members from the NPO “*Namiai Ikuyukai*”, one staff from *Achi* village Education Board, the *Namiai* school principal and six teachers, four *Namiai* school students who were original citizens of *Namiai*, two parents of local students and all fourteen of the students in the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program. Other significant opinions were provided by local citizens who talked with the research group on various topics such as the education system and current issues surrounding education in the village. Questionnaires were sent to thirteen parents of *Sanson-Ryugaku* students with assistance from the NPO and eight of them responded. Regarding the location of interviews, predominantly they were conducted at the subject’s work place, school or occasionally they took place in such locations as the morning market, a soccer field before a game or even while walking with *Sanson-Ryugaku* students from their home to school. Depending on the interview location the researchers took notes and at times a tape recorder was used. During the fieldwork, observation of the classroom activities both in and outside the classroom was conducted. The research group observed the process of classes from beginning to end and a practical class outside the classroom which provided the students life skills and similar knowledge.

1-5. Limitations

The research time frame was a constraint for finding detailed benefits and problems. As a thorough study in education demands a greater period of time to see results simply a single interview is not the best way to achieve a universally convincing conclusion. Not all members of the group possessed a deep knowledge of Japanese. The research group consisted of three international students and one Japanese student. This created a bottleneck in communication and information sharing. It is also clear that one of the weaknesses of the research is that focus was placed more on stakeholders who have a direct relationship with *Sanson-Ryugaku* and there were few interviews conducted with people who were not directly involved the program such as the two local parents and two community members.

1-6. Conceptual framework



Source: Authors

The above conceptual framework demonstrates how each stakeholder affects other entities and consequently what benefits they receive from the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program. The problems mentioned on the left side of the graph are the problems stakeholders face and through the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program some of the problems can be solved. It shows the dual communities which are the "Physical Community" and the "Psychological Community". The former expresses the community wherein stakeholders live continuously and the latter demonstrates what extent people consciously or subconsciously regard stakeholders in the community. *Sanson-Ryugaku* students are involved in *Namiiai* community by participating in the program offered by the NPO "Namiiai Ikuyukai". The physical community on the other hand symbolizes the stakeholders that are connected through *Namiiai* School.

2. BENEFITS OF IMPLEMENTING THE SANSON-RYUGAKU PROGRAM

2-1. Sanson-Ryugaku Students and Their Parents

Sanson-Ryugaku students certainly benefit from the program in many ways since they are the target group. From an academic prospective, the participating children can enjoy a better educational environment due to the low teacher-student ratio; thus allowing careful instruction by teachers. *Namiiai* School has only seventy-nine children compared to sixteen teachers with office staff and a custodian. This means that, even though the average teacher to student ratio in Japan is 17.4, the ratio in *Namiiai* School is merely 4.3 (MEXT, 2008). One participating child expressed that her favorite subject changed from Arts to Physical Education after she joined *Namiiai* School

because in her previous school, she always repeated the same activities in P.E. class however now she enjoys a wider variety of activities. This is a good example of children participating in the program and enjoying education more in *Namiai* School.

Sanson-Ryugaku students obtain experiences only available in rural areas such as forestry education, skiing and farming. Since children participating in the program live together in the same dormitory, they also learn to do things on their own such as washing their clothes, cleaning and cooking. Through these experiences, even parents of participating children in urban areas who see their children less than once a month can gauge the children's change in the attitude towards nature, other children and exercise. The program participants learn to think more about and be more sensitive to their surroundings and natural environment and learn how to take care of younger children. The general number of students is small in the school and it maintains both an elementary and a junior high school. A result if this close proximity is all students know each other and subconsciously learn how to live in groups of different-age people. Conversely, at urban schools there are a great number of students and there are few opportunities to interact with children of different ages.

It is a good opportunity for children who were born and raised in urban areas to share information and knowledge with youth of different social backgrounds and vice versa. One example is a boy in *Namiai* who liked trains but as there were no trains in *Namiai*, he heard about them from *Sanson-Ryugaku* children who came from urban areas and shared his passion for them.

Even supposing that the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program offered in *Namiai* is not aimed for participating children to escape from urban stresses like bullying, some of the participating children told us that they do not want to go back to their home school because their previous friends bullied them. The role of “healing” opportunities through the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program as mentioned in the first chapter is a factor in this situation as well.

Various direct benefits to the parents of the children in the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program were not found as they consider their children's benefits above their own. However, the appropriate distance between children and their parents in which they can meet at most only once a month and cannot talk on the phone except for emergency situations does instill a sense of independence.

2-2. Community Members: School

2-2-1. School Principal and Teachers

A predominant reason for inviting *Sanson-Ryugaku* students into the community is to fill classes and avoid class room multi-grading.⁷ Every year the school informs the NPO of the number and grade of students that need extra children to avoid multi-grading. The school representatives are invited to events organized by the NPO such as the entrance ceremony or harvest festival. The *Sanson-Ryugaku* students are considered and treated the same as local children. They are considered members of the school and the community, not as outsiders. When there are

⁷Multi-grading is “combining students from more than one grade in one classroom for the majority of the instructional day” (<http://www.usm.maine.edu/cepare/pdf/meg/meg16.pdf>). In Japan, by law, if the sum of two grades is less than approximately fifteen, they must be combined into a multi-grade class in elementary school. If the class includes the first grade, however, it should be made into a multi-grade class only if the sum of first grade and second grade is less than eight students. (公立義務教育諸学校の学級編制及び教職員定数の標準に関する法律, 昭和三十二年五月一日法律第百十六号)

too few students in a class, there is no stimulation to compete with each other and the general atmosphere of learning can become too relaxed. When *Sanson-Ryugaku* students participate in a class they are keener to try farming and enjoy sports activities in nature more than the local children making them more open-minded. With their arrival, local students realize the rich resources they have making the *Sanson-Ryugaku* students a beneficial addition to the school.

2-2-2. Local Students

The *Sanson-Ryugaku* program offers many benefits to local students who are in close contact with the children in the program. Outside of school hours they study and play together; even on weekends. They mingle with each other easily and develop solid friendships. The local children as well as the *Sanson-Ryugaku* children participate in special events arranged by the NPO including ice hockey, skiing, mountain climbing, tennis, baseball, cycling and soccer. Due to the small number of students in *Namiai* School there are few sport clubs for extracurricular activities⁸, so the sports activities offered by the NPO are quite useful for local students as well. Occasionally, local and *Sanson-Ryugaku* students go for trips to other cities together. Students from the *Namiai* area learn new things from *Sanson-Ryugaku* students including different aspects of urban life. At times, the local students visit the home towns of their friends from the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program during vacations. After finishing junior high school, the *Sanson-Ryugaku* students return to urban areas and like to settle there for further education and future employment. Different aspects of urban life like supermarkets and public transportation systems such as trains which are not visible in *Namiai* also attract the local children.

Sanson-Ryugaku is a stimulating opportunity for the children from rural areas. It provides an opportunity for children from different social backgrounds to share information, interact with students from diverse social backgrounds and develop lasting friendships. The students of the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program provide a new type of mind-set at the school. It is a new type of relationship since the local students tend to become used to a fixed relationship with friends who they know well for a long period from when they were born. The outsiders can activate an environment where the relationships are fixed.

The NPO not only manages the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program but also arranges the *Gakudo*, a facility which offers children a place to stay after school hours if parents are at work. Thanks to the *Gakudo* children do not have to stay at home in solitude. It also arranges social gatherings, craft activities and sports events. These activities are good opportunities for local students and community members to interact with the *Sanson-Ryugaku* students. *Sanson-Ryugaku* children actively participate in the community activities of the village and can create a healthy sense of competition with local students.

⁸ According to the principal of *Namiai* School they only have a tennis club.

2-3. Community Members: Villagers

In the research, interviews with villagers were conducted at the morning market where local people sell hand-made local products. The interviewees were two male villagers in their 70s who were born in the *Namiai* area. The villagers voiced concerns about depopulation by stating that people tended to migrate to urban areas and have fewer children resulting in less families participating in agricultural work. As a result, there are problems with reduced numbers of children in schools. However, before talking about the education, they emphasized the importance of eating healthy food and the possibility of this in the countryside. If agriculture education is included in the school curriculum, it can be the solution for many issues such as depopulation. Instead of thinking how they can promote more people to settle in the village or how to fill the school building with students, simply making agricultural life attractive and interesting will automatically direct people's minds towards the countryside. To achieve this, the interviewees suggested that the government should seriously work to maintain local communities and teach children the importance of agriculture and forestry.

The villagers wished “people saw the ground instead of looking far away.” For example, one interviewee who was a *soba* noodle producer utilized the skills of making this product and tried introducing ingredients that has medicinal values such as the potato-like *Yakon* vegetable or *Kikumomo* flower. The *soba* producer mixed the freeze-dried powder of the *Yakon* and *Kikumomo* into the *soba*. Villagers marketed the local product created in a traditional way and also had a high nutritional value. This made the product healthier and more attractive in urban areas.

The villagers did not directly mention the advantages or benefits to the community members generated by *Sanson-Ryugaku*. However, in general they expressed their positive attitude towards the program and its participants. They mentioned that the community considers the participating children as part of the community since the children actively participate in the social activities of the village. The villagers also said that the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program motivates people to do things that they do not normally do or find value in. It revitalizes their community by allowing members to “re-realize” aspects such as the nature filled environment and related activities including farming.

2-4. Education Council of *Achi* village

The Education Council is trying to improve the standards of education in *Achi* village. They have hired the services of experienced retired teachers to help the regular school teachers improve their instruction skills and performance in the class room. These retired teachers hired by the Education Council who perform various tasks to improve education levels in *Achi* village are called “support staff”. Occasionally, they themselves teach the classes in schools as well as attend the classes and observe the teaching methods of teachers. The support staffs identify the weaknesses of teachers and give suggestions to them. This year, supplementary classes are being conducted especially to improve the mathematical abilities of elementary school students.

Three junior high schools will merge into *Achi* Village Junior High School over the next three years. The Educational Council arranges school visits for the children to ensure a smooth merger of the schools by letting

students attend the activities of the other schools. In addition, its objective is to reduce the academic performance gap among students from different elementary schools in *Achi* village in preparation for the merging. The first year of elementary school is crucial because in this grade children build the basis of scholastic knowledge. If the academic performance gap among students is not bridged then this rift can persist and continue to grow with the passage of time. Also, in order to facilitate the smooth merger of schools, the Educational Council and school principals meet regularly to discuss varying issues.

The *Sanson-Ryugaku* program contributes to the empowerment of the community as a whole. It has a long history and is accepted by the local community. The program offers many benefits to local students and motivates them to learn more as well as to help the school avoid the multi-grade system caused by a decreasing number of local students. *Sanson-Ryugaku* is expected to continue both at elementary and junior high school levels due to an agreement between *Achi* village and *Namiai* community. *Namiai* community wants to continue with the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program however different communities have differing administration methods. *Achi* village administration has not conducted evaluations of the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program after the merger with *Namiai* community, even though the program has been conducted for several years. As explained in the first paragraph, the Educational Council is not involved in administration of *Sanson-Ryugaku*, although staff members do attend programs arranged by the NPO.

2-5. *Namiai* branch of *Achi* Village Administration

The relationship between the school and community is not of an academic nature alone, rather it is social. Both students and community members participate in sports festivals and other school activities since the concept of the community school is very important for the village. The ministry of education also intended to promote the interaction between school and community by making the school the center of community activities. The summary below explains the finding of the interview with the director of the *Namiai* branch of *Achi* village administration. He explained the unique qualities of *Namiai* School, its relationship with the community and the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program.

Namiai School was established with the idea of the “open school” philosophy as discussed in section 1-1-4. The local people accepted the concept and adopted it willingly. The previous *Namiai* School building was an ordinary D-box type school and was more orthodox in its architecture and design. The director of education at that time was interested in having a closer relationship between the school and the community, and invited residents to discuss the idea of an open school. In this way, the architecture of the new *Namiai* school building was intentionally designed in order to facilitate the close relationship between the school and the community. A university professor from Tokyo later visited *Namiai* village supporting the idea of an open school project by providing suggestions for the creation of the new school in *Namiai* community.

The *Sanson-Ryugaku* program supplied an opportunity to the local residents and students to rediscover their own community through the presence of participating children from outside of the region. Local students experienced the natural beauty, environment and assets of their village with the children from urban areas and gained the ability to see things from a different perspective. They learned to appreciate cultural treasures in a new

way through the motivation of children from other communities; without this stimulation they would simply have taken their surroundings for granted.

The *Sanson-Ryugaku* students are considered a part of the local community by residents. Their victory in social games like marathon is considered a victory for the community. They participate in community activities in the same way as locals do extending courtesy and respect to other members of the community. These students bring new talents, ideas and thinking to the school and community as a whole.

2-6. NPO “*Namiai Ikuyukai*”

According to the NPO Head Mr. Yoshida, the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program has a two pronged objective: “to revitalize the community and to empower students with life skills and strong souls”⁹. In different areas in Japan, *Sanson-Ryugaku* programs are implemented differently depending on the regional context. Some operate with a single purpose to support urban students who are falling behind the rest of their class in terms of grades or due to mental illness. The *Sanson-Ryugaku* program in *Namiai* village has two goals and one of them concerns revitalization of the local community.

Maintaining this program helps members of local community realize the resources they possess and their value. Since urban students in the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program are aware that the opportunities in *Namiai* are only available there and not in their hometowns, they are very keen to participate in all kinds of activities. Local students do not necessarily want to go skiing frequently but by seeing the *Sanson-Ryugaku* students actively participating in those activities, local students realize that there are valuable resources around them. This inspires them to take advantage of these opportunities and participate in the same sports. There is a positive influence to motivate the local students.

Sanson-Ryugaku students are certainly a good addition to the school system for prevention of multi-grading. As it has mutual benefits for the participating students and the community, the demand for participation among urban parents is increasing on a yearly basis and as of this year more than 100 students have gone through the program. One of the most beneficial features of the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program is that both the staff and students participate with their own interests in mind and still enjoy living in the same environment.

3. PROBLEMS FOR THE SANSON-RYUGAKU PROGRAM

By conducting the research, a range of outstanding benefits were found with all of the stakeholders, however, the study group found a number of problems regarding *Sanson-Ryugaku* program in *Namiai*. Some difficulties the participating youth will face when they get back to their original homes in urban areas were encountered through the research. Some participants became much more interested in sports and other outdoor activities instead of academics. In Japan, *juku* (cram schools) play a crucial role in enhancing children’s academic knowledge and

⁹ From the interview conducted to the NPO president, Mr. Yoshida

preparing them for high school entrance examinations, which is not offered in *Namiai*. When children return to school in their hometown, there will be an academic gap causing them duress. There are concerns about whether the students will be able to adjust themselves to the urban environment. In addition, the program accepts only elementary and junior high school students so they must go back to urban areas when they become high school students. It is not easy for the participating children to collect information from high schools in urban areas and prepare for entrance examinations.¹⁰

Currently, the trend of migrating from rural areas to urban centers for education and work is increasing. However, conversely due to the quality educational and natural environment of *Namiai*, there are some families which have moved there for the sake of their children education through experiencing the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program. *Sanson-Ryugaku* can be the initial factor urging outsiders to notice the beautiful surroundings of the *Namiai* community. The problem remains however, that although families do move to the community, it is not permanent and they usually leave when their children enter high school. Even local youth decide to go to the high schools which are located in urban areas so they must move to a location near the schools. As a result, the families of these children also move otherwise the students would have to travel for long periods of time or live alone without their family to reach school. Some of the parents who send their children on the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program would like to move to *Namiai* area, but this is difficult because *Namiai* does not have sufficient job opportunities for them.

From the previous problems raised in the above paragraph, it is clear that the physical distance of a school and where the family lives are one of the concerns for parents in sending their children to school. With this precondition, one can expect negative consequences to the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program after *Namiai* Junior School merges with *Achi* Third School in the 2010 academic year. A dramatic reduction in the number of children applying for the program is not an unreasonable prediction.

Moreover, as mentioned in the first chapter, it is a burden for the *Achi* Village administration to financially support the NPO conducting *Sanson-Ryugaku*. The *Achi* Village administration's annual budget was 5,781 million yen in 2007 (*Achi* village administration, n.d.), however the administration provides approximately thirteen million yen in subsidies per a year.¹¹ If you consider there are only 14 children participating in the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program, this is an expensive portion of the budget.

Since the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program has not been become well known among people in urban areas yet, many people have preconceptions of the parents who send their children on the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program. They battle misconceptions that their children are neglected or they have social problems such as being bullied or school truancy. The organizing NPO needs to demonstrate to the general populace that there are more benefits to the program than simply escaping urban stresses.

¹⁰ According to the interview to the president of the NPO, Mr. Yoshida

¹¹ According to the interview to Mr. Sasaki form Education Counsel of *Achi* village

4. CONCLUSION

The research demonstrates that the program has mutually beneficial effects on the *Sanson-Ryugaku* students and the local community. This mutual relationship is promoted by the active and positive attitudes of both sides. *Sanson-Ryugaku* students participate in local events such as festivals or races and interact with local people living in *Namiai* area. This is partially due to the acceptance policy of the NPO “*Namiai Ikuyukai*” and participants are carefully chosen when they apply. The community members of *Namiai* consider the participating children as members of the community, not outsiders, which is one of the reasons for the success. *Namiai* School which accepts all of the *Sanson-Ryugaku* students was established as an “open-school” wherein local community members can participate and join school activities. However, the strong relationship between local community and school is becoming weaker as time passes. This is partially due to the fact that teachers at *Namiai* School have changed repeatedly and there are few instructors who were present at the time of the schools establishment. Another reason is that after the *Namiai* area merged with *Achi* village and lost their autonomy in 2006 people have begun to lose the enthusiasm they had when the school was established. This situation was criticized by the head of the *Namiai* branch of the *Achi* village administration who oversaw the establishment of *Namiai* School with the cooperation of community members and the principal of *Namiai* School. There is room for improvement for establishing better community based school, still the relationship between school and community members remains strong. From this, it is clear that the open and flexible environment of accepting *Sanson-Ryugaku* children is firmly established as residents realize the need to revitalize their community with the cooperation with school, and also the importance of educating the children. However, most of these benefits generated both in the recipient community and participating children are not clearly visible; therefore people who do not know much about *Sanson-Ryugaku* can easily maintain negative perceptions towards parents who send their children on the program.

In addition, although most stakeholders agree on the positive impacts of the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program on the *Namiai* community, sustainability of the program is being questioned. Financial support from *Achi* village administration is relatively large portion of the NPO’s budget and the amount of the subsidy is shrinking each year.¹² Also, the number of children participating in the program may be reduced in the future because of the merging of *Namiai* Junior High School. It consequently will cause more serious financial instability for continuing the program.

The real challenge of the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program offered in *Namiai* is how to expand the program to more children and broader areas. Thus far, it is only offered in the *Namiai* community, however, *Namiai* junior high school will merge with *Achi* Village Third Junior High School in the near future and there is a need of arrange a dialog among the different communities of *Achi* village on the future of the program. In addition, there is a need to expand the number of *Sanson-Ryugaku* students. One possibility for expansion is to invite international students for the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program. Since agriculture in *Achi* village is very important, the technology used in this area is an attractive aspect to people from foreign countries. Community members could utilize these resources and attract people not only from domestic markets, but also from other countries. Although the NPO and the

¹² Mr. Yoshida mentioned the amount of budget in the interview we conducted.

Educational Council already have financial difficulties in maintaining the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program, decentralization is being promoted in Japan and correspondingly subsidies from the central government are shrinking (Ministry of Finance, 2007). Therefore, for future direction, the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program should be offered with increased involvement from more stakeholders including members of the private sectors and parents who send children to the program.

Depopulation is the biggest challenge faced by the *Achi* village as well as other rural areas of Japan. *Nagano* prefecture has the second highest rate of village mergers after *Hokkaido* Prefecture. The trend of late marriages is also becoming prevalent among the young generation. Therefore, the number of children is decreasing gradually. Besides the *Sanson-Ryugaku* program, however, there seem to be other attractions for people from urban areas to migrate to *Namiai* area. For example this year, 6 students transferred from urban areas to *Namiai* School because their parents became employed in the Forestry and Tourism Industries. This may be the result of *Achi* administration's efforts to attract more residents. In addition, all the interviewees including the parents of local students who moved to *Namiai* were attracted by the beautiful surroundings and the possibilities to do business while being able to avoid urban stress. It was seen through the research that interest in moving to rural areas already exists among people in urban settings yet the effective and practical policy for mobilization, fitting in the local context and meeting the urban people's needs is still necessary.

For future direction, we would like to emphasize the need of further research of graduate students. As mentioned earlier, the research found some difficulties that participating children face when they return to urban areas. Parents raise concerns about whether their children will be able to readjust to the urban environment. Conversely, one of the aims of this program is aiming to eventually influence and change schools in urban areas through the graduates playing a leading role in when they return to their home schools. There is a need to observe the future of the graduates of *Sanson-Ryugaku* to fully understand the effects of the program.

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