

The changing place of birth, declining birth rate and school refusal (the problem of school dropout) in Japan

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The change in the usual place of birth, declining birth rate and increasing school refusal cases are the three important recent problems in maternal and child health in Japan. The change of birth place from home to hospital began to occur in the 1950's and continued rapidly in the 1960's. By 1990, almost all birth took place in hospital (Fig. 1). Up to the 1950's, midwives assisted the delivery of newborns in women's homes and many family members participated in the birth of the baby. Few babies are delivered by midwives at home nowadays. This change has been said to make birth safer and prevent infectious diseases. There are disadvantages of a hospital birth, however, as it lacks the collaboration of family and community members, who may help the mother and the child. As a result, the tendency to think that the birth of babies was an individual event was strengthened.

In the 1970's, the prevalence of maternal neuroses increased, as the mother lacked support, since her husband spent the majority of time at work or in work-related activity. In the 1980's, however, conditions changed drastically. Fertility rates decreased rapidly (Fig. 2). As a result, a young Japanese family today commonly has an average of 1.5 children, compared with more than four children five decades ago. This reduction in birth rate is surprising. It occurred without any recommendation from the Japanese government, unlike the case in China, which required families to be limited to only one child. The roles of the family and community members for child health and education have been changed also.

Recently, the number of children not attending school has been increasing rapidly as shown in Fig. 3. This phenomenon may be a unique Japanese problem. These children do not attend school for a long time (more than 50 days per year) even though they are not ill. In those cases, they are called 'school refusals' [Tokokyohi in Japanese]. The exact reason for the rapid increase in school refusals is not yet clear. Some people insist that bad teachers and/or friends who do not support school education are responsible. On the contrary, some doctors insist that it is the result of mental and/or emotional disorders (school phobia in Britain) and that these are caused by incompetence of their parents. I think that it should be mentioned that drastic changes are in progress in the educational system, including increased competition, advanced education needed to understand contemporary technology, and intensive teaching in highly pressured

Figure 1

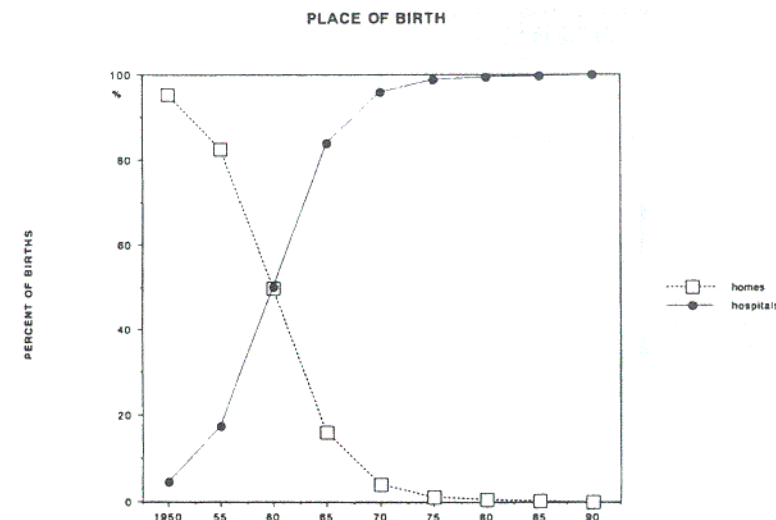


Figure 2

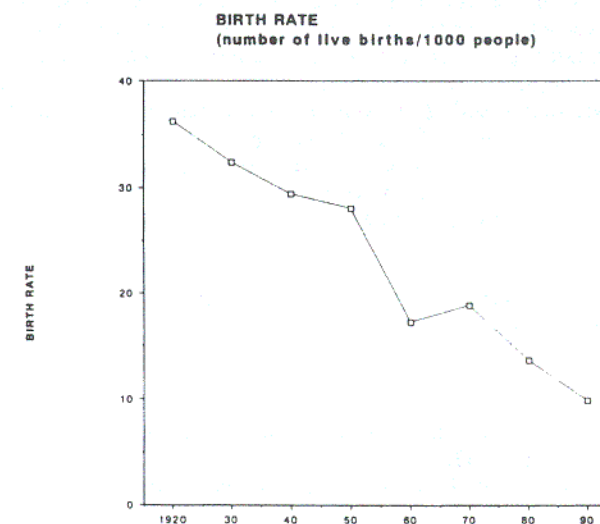
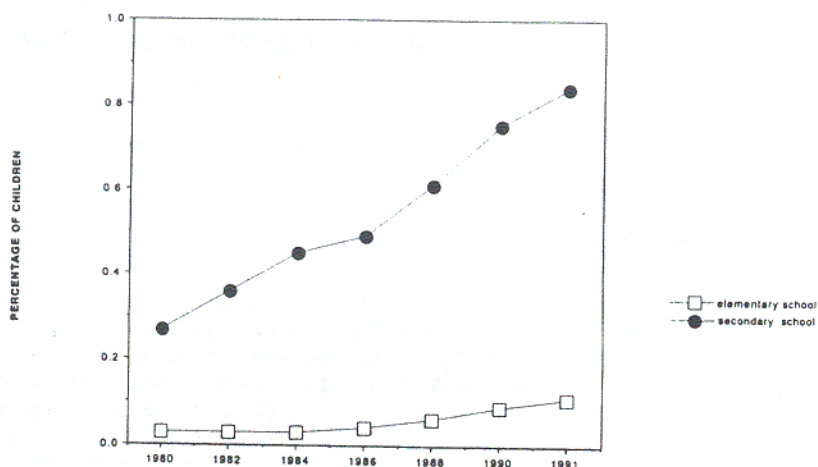


Figure 3

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN REFUSING TO ATTEND SCHOOL
(number of children absent from school for more than 50 days per year/100 children)



facilities, where children get very little education in human values.

I wonder which side is worth emphasizing, education for high technology in good facilities, or education for growing up as a socially responsible human being. If educational systems are continuously created to neglect human nature and human rights, the number of children who are not able to accept and enjoy that system would increase more rapidly. Good facilities and advanced technologies can't guarantee humane education. More democratic and scientific consideration of the rationality for child health and education system should be discussed. I find a connection between the recent tendency to modify the educational system in the direction of advanced technology, and the early tendency to change the place of birth from the home to the hospital.

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