

Research note

Children with Disabilities in Japanese Schools: Between Assistive Technologies and Social Barriers

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Summary

Japan is a pioneer country in the field of assistive technologies for people with disabilities. These technologies are not merely objects: they are designed to support disabled persons' social "integration" and the creation of an "inclusive society." That is, a society in which every aspect of life is accessible to any citizen — regardless of his/her life circumstances. In contrast to rehabilitation policies, which provide disabled individuals with special assistance (including assistive technologies) that help them to adapt to society, inclusion policies are instead aimed at transforming society so as to adapt it to the different needs of its citizens. The movement for "Universal Design," which emerged in the 1980s, has as its aim the connecting of technological and social issues, by improving the accessibility to various aspects of social life through technological and architectural means. In Japan the government is paying increasing attention particularly to the education sector, where assistive devices are seen as key to enabling disabled children to attend ordinary schools alongside nondisabled peers — so as to improve their access to higher education, and to a broader range of job opportunities. In practice, though, to what extent do assistive technologies and Universal Design actually contribute to the improvement of disabled children's inclusion in ordinary schools in Japan? This research note is based on quantitative data taken from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) statistics, and qualitative data from ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted in five Japanese primary schools. It analyzes the social processes and institutional barriers that shape the use of assistive technologies in the country's schools. It shows that, in the Japanese supposedly technology-friendly social context, there still remain strong barriers — ones that can be identified as social rather than technical — to disabled children's greater inclusion in the country's schools.

Keywords: disability, Japan, assistive technologies, universal design, education

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