

Title	Envisioning diversity : politics of the Hattatsu Shōgai movement in Japan
Sub Title	
Author	照山, 絢子(Teruyama, Junko)
Publisher	Centre for Advanced Research on Logic and Sensibility The Global Centers of Excellence Program, Keio University
Publication year	2010
Jtitle	CARLS series of advanced study of logic and sensibility Vol.3, (2009.) ,p.299- 303
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	Part 4 : Philosophy and Anthoropology
Genre	Research Paper
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=KO12002001-20100331-0299

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Envisioning Diversity: Politics of the Hattatsu Shōgai Movement in Japan

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Learning disability (LD), attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder are relatively new terms in Japan. Although there seems to be some mention in academic journals published during the 80s, it was only in the 1990s that they gained currency in the popular media by the generic term, hattatsu shōgai (translated literally as “developmental disability”). In 2002, MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) organized a research committee which conducted a nation-wide survey to estimate the number of elementary and middle-school children with special needs. The results showed that 6.3% of children who are currently enrolled in regular classrooms require special assistance for one or more of the aforementioned conditions. (MEXT 2002) This figure, together with relentless pressure from the public, led to the 2007 landmark educational reform for public schools nationwide to accommodate for children with these disabilities through differentiated instruction and extensive utilization of special education resources. (MEXT 2003)

This landmark legislative change is celebrated by the activists as an attestation to the fact that the social landscape in Japan is shifting towards a more tolerant and liberal one which embraces difference and diversity among its population. However, a closer look at the ways in which the hattatsu shōgai movement has and continues to shape itself within the Japanese society reveals a more intricate picture whereby the meaning of “diversity” is highly malleable and subject to various interpretations and contestations. In this paper, I will examine some of the ways in which this movement grapples with the notion of “diversity” in its activism.

The hattatsu shōgai movement, led mostly by mothers of children with hattatsu shōgai, has been placing the reform of regular education at the forefront of its

agenda. They have criticized the regular education for its intolerance and inflexibility in accommodating for the children's special academic and social needs. The Japanese educational system has long enforced a separatist policy with regard to special education, and while it has allocated various resources and accommodations for the schools designated for disabled children, the regular education classrooms were administered by a highly centralized system that left little room for individualized instruction. However, starting in the late 1980s, MEXT began to focus its attention on the enhancement of "kosei" or individual character of each student in its public education policies. The hattatsu shōgai movement took advantage of this general trend towards the emphasis on "kosei" and used the rhetoric of "disability as kosei" taken from the 1970s cerebral palsy patients' activism to make the association that their advocacy is in agreement with the larger goal of the current Japanese educational system. (Yokotsuka 2007)

How, then, is the term "kosei" used in their advocacy? The website of Asperger Society Japan explains that hattatsu shōgai is "one of those possibilities and kosei that people are born with". By defining disability as being manifested "only when one grows up to experience various difficulties," they state that "if a person grows up in an environment that does not create such difficulties, we wouldn't call that person disabled even if there may be potential risk factors." (Asperger Society Japan 2009) Adopting the social model of disability, the term "kosei" in this context is used as a point of reference to turn the tables on the societal attitude towards people with special needs. This strategy is also seen in a brochure published by Japan Dyslexia Society (Figure 1). Titled "The reasons why we are all so special," this brochure depicts the idea of respecting diversity through an illustration, "If Japan were a country of 100 children." This picture shows the various "kosei" that children have, juxtaposing hattatsu shōgai with other likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. While it shows children who "like to cook," "wear glasses," "like soccer," "are not social (referring to autism spectrum disorder)," "have difficulty reading and writing (referring to LD)," "are hyperactive (referring to ADHD)" and "cannot go to school," it is noteworthy that representations of physical and intellectual disabilities as well as mental disorders are absent from this picture.

In this sense, the "diverse society" that the hattatsu shōgai movement envisions is formulated around a distinctive rhetoric of "kosei" which connotes the strengths and talents of each child that ought to be cultivated through education. While children with hattatsu shōgai experience difficulties in certain areas, their talents in other areas are highly noted, and the criticism goes to the existing educational system which puts so much emphasis on well-rounded ability to the extent that it fails to help children make the most of their projecting talents in specific areas. By claiming that the "baratsuki", or "bumpiness/unevenness" of the abilities in children with hattatsu shōgai is almost as trivial as that of nearsightedness which can

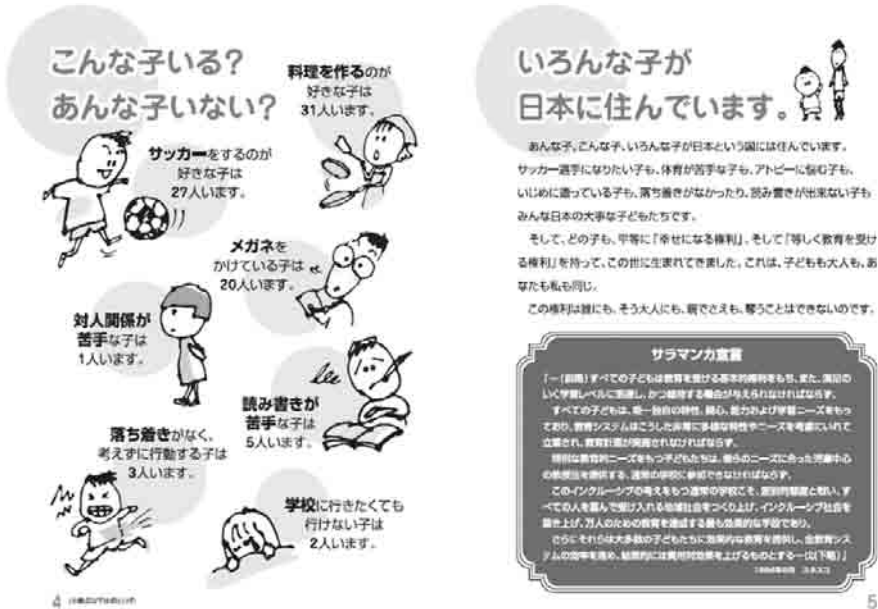


Figure 1. If Japan were a country of 100 children

be corrected with eyeglasses, the movement embraces the notion of “diversity” as the appreciation and respect for the different fields in which individuals excel and an understanding for the different ways in which they must be scaffolded to make average achievement in other areas. This view of diversity has led to the hattatsu shōgai movement’s breakoff with other disability rights movements, which has, for better or for worse, been historically associated with a more paternalistic view of the disabled as the socially weak and incompetent.

Despite the activists’ attempt to distance hattatsu shōgai from other categories of disability, the clinical practices in the medical field reveal a picture where the boundaries are actually open to contention. The reality is that those who come to seek medical attention, especially adults, often come not for the treatment of hattatsu shōgai itself, but for what is referred to as “secondary symptoms” such as social withdrawal, depression, alcoholism and other problems that surfaced as a result of lowered self-esteem and the daily pressure and struggle of coping with their disability. (Koumori et al. 2008) Activists have referred to these cases as negative examples of how their children may end up if they are left without early diagnosis and appropriate intervention. By claiming that childhood for people with hattatsu shōgai is, in effect, a kind of a liminal phase in which preventive measures must be taken to ensure that one does not fall into the category of the mentally ill, the

activists have positioned hattatsu shōgai as a realm of in-betweenness on the sliding scale of social membership. Deploying mental illness as a negative example, the movement brings up an interesting polemic in the landscape of disability politics.

On the other hand, there are criticisms that the reliance on psychiatrists for their expertise to diagnose and treat children too often essentializes differences. Indeed, one of the most often voiced arguments against hattatsu shōgai is that it paints an all too simplistic picture of children with special needs as medical subjects, and that it fails to take into account the naturally diverse ways in which children develop, as well as the society's capability to embrace such versatility without turning to the language of medicine for legitimizing every difference in each individual. (Kanazawa 2003) Debates have emerged even within the medical discipline, as to whether and how the "bubble or inflation of diagnosis," as Ken Takaoka, a prominent psychiatrist calls it, would have serious ramifications in the society as well as in the field of psychiatry. (Matsumoto and Takaoka 2008; Ogura 2006) The backlash against the hattatsu shōgai movement articulates, although implicitly, the disconcerted public sentiment toward the way in which individual differences and diversity are addressed and conceptualized within the movement.

What I have attempted to argue in this paper is that while all that the hattatsu shōgai movement has accomplished in its short history are celebrated as a significant step towards recognizing the diversity of the lived experiences by minority populations in today's Japan, what exactly is meant by the term "diversity" in this given society is subject to ongoing debate. In fact, I would argue that the hattatsu shōgai movement is a "movement to question the meaning of diversity" as much as it is a "movement to create diversity." Although biomedical research has contributed much to our understanding of human development and its versatility, the problematic boundary that delineates the notions of dis/ability must be explored in tandem with the question of how we envision the idea of individuality and difference in our society today.

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