

# The Development and Challenges of Barrier-free Picture Books in Japan

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This study traces the development in Japan of picture books that are both designed for and accessible to children with disabilities, and that tell about disabilities. Picture books designed for children with disabilities are today often called “accessible picture books” or “universal access” picture books. Those that tell about disabilities are known as “picture books about disability” or “portrayals of disability”. Following previous literature published in Japan on this subject, however, both these categories will be referred to as “barrier-free picture books” for the purposes of this study.

## 1. Purpose and Structure of This Study

In research on barrier-free picture books, original source materials and documents have not been sufficiently identified, and the extent and circumstances of such books are not well known. Review of previous research reveals a shortage of document-supported study that looks at how barrier-free picture books developed from their inception to the present day and that updates research on circumstances today, including the issues faced. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to delineate the development of barrier-free picture books in Japan and to clarify their current status and issues. Since records are expected to be lost or scattered, this study also aims to preserve and document existing materials. The study consists of chapters 1 and 2 tracing the development of barrier-free books and chapters 3, 4, and 5 discussing the development in further detail.

## 2. The Spread of Barrier-free Picture Books in Japan

The development of barrier-free picture books was explored under two categories: barrier-free picture books for children with disabilities; and barrier-free picture books telling about disabilities.

The story of the first category, the development of barrier-free picture books for children with disabilities told in chapter 1 begins around 1970 with handmade touchable picture books created by parents and volunteers for children with visual impairments. Handmade cloth picture books designed for children with severe disabilities began to be created in Sapporo in 1975. In 1981, Braille-transcribed picture books with explanations of the illustrations added in Braille using transparent

sheets were also created for blind parents who wished to read picture books to their children. When advancements in printing technology made it possible to use raised printing, commercial publication of “tactile picture books” was realized in 1979. Later, “tactile picture books with Braille” were published in Japan, in which visual pictures were printed in raised print and printed in both type and Braille. Picture books that can be read in sign language and easy-to-read books for young people with intellectual disabilities were introduced to Japan from overseas around 2000. Barrier-free picture books for children with disabilities reached their peak from around the time of the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981 to the year 2000.

Developments in the second category of barrier-free picture books telling about disabilities described in chapter 2 begin with the first book to be published in Japan was *Hasegawa-kun kirai ya* (I Don’t Like Hasegawa-kun) in 1976. As the author himself was a victim of arsenic milk poisoning, it was also a barrier-free picture book created by a person who himself lived with disability. From the pioneer days to the 1980s, many of the barrier-free picture books depicting disability, especially those produced by people with disabilities themselves, were ones that present society with the realities of disability. In recent years, many picture books have become explanatory in nature because of the need to use picture books to understand disability. The way disability has been depicted in picture books is itself a record that reflects Japanese society.

### 3. Discussion and Issues

Chapter 3 discusses the social and other factors that influenced the development of barrier-free picture books, including the signing of treaties and passage of legislation in Japan, the International Board on Books project for collection of books for young people with disabilities, trends in library activity, and the activities of the book publisher Kaiseisha. And the chapter identifies three periods in the development: (1) 1950 to mid-1980s: Pioneering period influenced by the International Year of Disabled Persons; (2) 1990 to mid-2010s: Relationship between the orientation toward books that can be enjoyed together and universalization of the ideal of a symbiotic society; (3) Post-mid-2010s: Influence of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the subsequent passage of laws regarding reading by the disabled, and the increase in barrier-free materials in library collections.

Chapter 4 considers the barriers that were overcome in the development of barrier-free picture books. It became clear that there were three: there were “barriers to enjoyment of picture books,” which were overcome by tactile picture books and cloth picture books; there were also “barriers in the environment” that were overcome by publishers and libraries; and there were “barriers standing in the way of the right to read” such as access to picture books for sight-impaired parents and the rights to read of the intellectually disabled.

Chapter 5 deals with the issues facing barrier-free picture books in Japan. One issue is that some children are again being excluded from barrier-free picture books due to the reproduction of barriers. Picture books are a visual form of culture, so the question that has been asked—*Can tactile picture books and cloth picture books, which are a form of play, be called “picture books”?*—has been left unanswered. There is also the issue of whether the “pictures” in tactile picture books should be pictures that help the reader understand the visible world and its forms, or pictures that are different from expressions of the visual world that can be read with the reader’s own powers. This issue also involves respecting the identity of those who cannot see, and considering disability from a social model, in which “disability” is defined as the limitation of activity and participation due to inadequacies in the environment. In order to resolve these issues, the study points out the importance of “co-creation” by “receivers - mediators - makers” as well as the recognition that “barrier-free” is only realized by overcoming repeated conflicts.

#### 4. Significance and limitations of this study

The significance of this study is that it is the first academic attempt to clarify the development and challenges of barrier-free picture books in Japan. We believe that our goal of identifying and documenting records that are in the process of being lost has been achieved to some extent. However, there is a limitation in that there may be materials that have not yet been dug up. In addition, the fact that include electronic resources could not be included in the research is an issue for the future.