Neurodiversity Oases Development and Extension

A Policy Brief for Supporting Neurodiversity Inclusive Learning in Japan

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Introduction

Innovative educators, designers, and researchers have been looking to communities of shared interests to design activities and environments that support social connection, learning, and development for neurodivergent young people. These include gaming clubs, maker spaces, and online communities facilitated by educators, peers, and caregivers. One autistic young person described his role playing game group as an "oasis" where he could find sustenance and escape from the desert of social life and adult-driven learning of school. This contrast between an oasis and a desert provides a powerful metaphor for understanding the experiences of neurodivergent young people in these supportive activities and communities centered on shared interests and play.

Neurodiversity oases are environments that grow out of organic communities of interest—media fandoms, creative practices, and games—while intentionally layering in educational approaches that support inclusion, learning, and development. These spaces function as refuges where neurodivergent young people can recharge, connect, and learn through socially comfortable and energizing modes of interaction, rather than being asked to conform to dominant norms. The key features and case studies of neurodiversity oases are described in the report Neurodiversity Oases: Supporting Connection, Learning, and Development through Shared Interests and Play.

This policy brief builds on this report by identifying a series of policy recommendations for spreading Neurodiversity Oases in Japan—Neurodiversity Oases Development and Extension (NODEs):

- Creating 2.5 places within schools
- Institutional recognition of Free Schools (alternative schools in Japan)
- Incorporating Free School functions within university campuses

These are a preliminary set of ideas developed through the ongoing activities of the Neurodiversity Potential Study Group (NeuPoteKen), a cross-cultural research group of Japanese and English-speaking scholars who have been convening seminars and workshops in 2025 - 2026. This brief is offered as a conversation starter to invite dialogue, engagement, and improvement of our ideas.

Policy Recommendation 1

Creating 2.5 Places Within Schools

In educational institutions from elementary through high school, establish a formal institutional framework for "2.5 places." Drawing from the concept of "Third Places" that are distinct from the "first places" of home and the "second places" of school and work, Hideki Suzuki and Makiko Saito, in *Unlock Learning*, describe 2.5 places within schools. 2.5 places include, for example, resource rooms, pull-out classes (通級 *tsūkyū*), and school health rooms where children can engage in interest-driven activities. Resource rooms, where students can temporarily step away

from the regular classroom, are particularly noteworthy as spaces where activities can be designed around learning styles and paces suited to each child's individual *tokusei*[2].

School spaces often require assimilation and adaptation on the part of neurodivergent children, and are not always grounded in their interests, *tokusei*, and strengths. 2.5 spaces represent an opportunity to create an intermediate zone within schools and school systems for activities outside of the classroom for more flexible, interest-driven participation.

Connecting with Out-of-School Interest-Driven Groups

Establish a system within 2.5 places in school and at afterschool day services[3] that enables external interest-driven groups to offer clubs or workshops. These could include university extracurricular organizations, community volunteers, and specialist practitioners. Unlike typical school club activities (部活動 *bukatsudou*), these clubs and workshops should not require uniformity, long-term participation, or formal evaluation, in order to make them more accessible to neurodivergent children who may vary in the intensity of their interests or in their rhythm of engagement.

This system would enable children to encounter diverse expertise and role models within school settings. Particularly in fields where neurodivergent youth tend to show strong interest—such as gaming, media production, technology, and creative activities—leveraging community resources both inside and outside of school would be essential for expanding learning options.

Accreditation and Recognition of Mentor Programs

Establish a system that grants academic credit (through electives such as volunteering, internships, or project-based learning courses), certification, and, where necessary, financial support to university student mentors who participate in interest-driven clubs inside and outside of schools. This ensures that mentoring is not solely dependent on volunteering time and goodwill, but is sustainably embedded as part of the educational curriculum.

Gaining an understanding of neurodiversity and acquiring practical mentorship experience will also contribute to university students' professional development in fields such as education, public health, and technology. We expect that participating in NODEs would be particularly beneficial in career choices and possibilities for students in teacher training programs or educational research. See Recommendation #3 for additional implications for university settings.

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[2] Commonly translated as "individual characteristics" or "unique characteristics," the term *tokusei* lacks a direct English equivalent. The term is often used to describe neurodivergent characteristics and disabilities, but can also refer more generally to personal qualities and quirks. Unlike the marginalizing or negative connotations that can accompany terms such as "divergent" or "special" in English, the prefix *toku* (advantageous, distinctive, exceptional), and the term *tokusei* is a positive and strengths-oriented term, with connotations similar to the colloquial use of the term "superpower."

[3] Afterschool day services (放課後等デイサービス *houkago dei sa-bisu*) are welfare services available after school and during extended school breaks.

Supporting NODEs Training for School Social Workers

Institutionalize opportunities for school social workers to learn about the theory and practice of NODEs. Conventional therapies tend to focus on responding to problems and "adaptive support." By contrast, NODEs start with children's strengths and interests, and the focus is on building social connections. If social workers acquire this perspective, they will be able to reorganize support resources inside and outside of school and build more preventive and developmentally supportive approaches.

Developing Interdisciplinary Talent at the Intersection of Technology and Neurodiversity

Promote the development of talent with a cross-cutting understanding of technology and neurodiversity. Digital games, maker spaces, and online communities can serve as important learning environments for neurodivergent children alongside physical spaces. Developing NODEs learning environments will require experts who understand technology-supported learning as well as neurodiversity- inclusive educational and developmental support.

Policy Recommendation 2

Institutional Recognition of Free Schools

Recognize free schools that support NODEs within the public educational system so children and families can engage with confidence and stability. Free schools in Japan are non-accredited educational settings that serve children who are not attending traditional schools. They do not follow the age-based curricula of the public system and often organize learning based on children's interests, *tokusei*, and developmental rhythms.

Free schools are currently institutionally and financially unstable, and are generally viewed as alternative or temporary refuges for school-refusing children. Positioning free schools as public educational infrastructure supporting learning, development, and social participation would establish a new understanding: that learning based on children's interests and *tokusei* is not a mere supplement to "real" learning, but rather an essential foundation for learning, development, and social participation. Acting on this recommendation would support a shift towards an educational system grounded in diversity, inclusion, and strengths rather than assimilation to standardized curriculum and settings.

Public Subsidies for Free School Attendance

Establish a system that allows a portion of the public educational budget to be used for children to attend free schools. This system would provide public support for diverse learning rights for children and would not make learning out of school a burden on individuals and families. Inequality in learning opportunities is a problem not only in Japan but worldwide. Public subsidies will remove financial barriers and help sustain engagement with free schools for families who need them.

Credit Hours for Free School Attendance

Establish a system that recognizes participation in free schools as school-attendance time by offering credit hours. This liberates children from the negative "school refusal" label and ensures continuity and legitimacy in their learning. Recognizing free school attendance through credit hours and certification will maintain options for advancement to higher education and professional society. It will be important to not merely keep track of credit hours, but also to build a framework in collaboration with schools that can flexibly evaluate learning processes, project outcomes, and records of social participation.

Establishing a Referral and Connection System from Public Schools

Establish official channels through which public schools can refer and connect children to free schools. Currently, transitions to free schools usually depend on individual parental initiative, with limited coordination with schools. By defining a referral system, schools and free schools can transition from an adversarial to a collaborative relationship centered on the best interests of the child. This would create a learning ecosystem that recognizes diverse learning pathways suited to children's developmental stages and interests, rather than seeing the return to traditional schooling as the primary goal.

Policy Recommendation 3

Incorporating Free School Functions Within University Campuses

Establish a system that locates free school NODEs within university campuses, operating as a research lab conducting training as well as validation and design research. Universities are knowledge hubs that generate theory and return it to society. However, research and practice in neurodiversity and learning are not yet well integrated. Incorporating NODEs free schools within campuses would also offer opportunities to develop new models that integrate practice, research, and professional development.

Positioning as a Formal University Program

Institutionalize NODEs free schools within the university campus not as an extracurricular activity, but as part of the university's formal educational and research programs. This will enable a stable operational structure that would support children's ongoing participation, as well as institutional support for ethics review and safeguarding. Furthermore, NODEs could become research hubs that integrate multiple fields—including education, developmental psychology, engineering, arts, design, and information science—strengthening both credibility and theoretical foundations.

Crediting and Academicizing Student Mentorship

Establish a system that recognizes the involvement of graduate and undergraduate students as NODEs mentors and researchers through research or course credits within the university's curriculum.

University students have always participated in NODEs-like activities, through personal interests, laboratory activities, or through voluntary organizations such as clubs and circles. A significant number of university students also engage with related interests and activities through their undergraduate or master's thesis research. These types of graduate and undergraduate activities could be more integrated in the formal curriculum through NODEs.

Establishing systems of this kind would ensure that mentorship activities are not solely dependent on volunteer effort, but are embedded in the educational curriculum and professional development. Students would develop a practical understanding of neurodiversity, facilitation, and community design, and would become a boundary-crossing talent pool prepared to lead innovation in education, public welfare, and technology.

Building a Circulatory Structure Between Practice and Research

Build a rigorous research base by documenting and analyzing NODEs free school practices and outcomes. At the same time, build a circulatory structure that returns research findings to the field and continuously updates activity design and support methods at NODEs free schools. Through this reciprocal process, the theory behind NODEs evolves beyond concept to become a verifiable model. Provide institutional support for this circulatory relationship in which practice generates research and research deepens practice.

Campus as a Hub for Real-World Implementation

Rather than as a closed research space, position the campus as a hub for real-world implementation, connected to communities, public education, and NODEs free schools. The on-campus lab becomes a hub for collaboration with schools, local governments, and community organizations, and works toward broader societal outcomes through policy recommendations and model development. In this way, universities not only develop theory, but take on the role of a core institution for implementing neurodiversity-inclusive learning environments.

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