

Disability Community Network Meeting IV: Inclusion

By Andrew Lim

To create true inclusion and access, we should also strive towards a recognition of difference in bodies and minds...[and] remain aware of the need to involve disabled people as we strive to do so.

— Victor Zhuang, disability studies scholar and doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Chicago

Do we need to question our assumptions of what “disability” means? What does it mean to be “inclusive” to disabled people?

These were questions for attendees of the fourth [Disability Community Network \(DCN\)¹ meeting](#) on 27 March 2019, which spotlighted the subject of inclusion.

Jointly organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the [Social Service Research Centre](#), the meeting, held at the SportSG Auditorium, saw close to 40 representatives from voluntary welfare organisations and social enterprises, disability advocates and others interested in the disability sector.

Community Initiatives on Inclusion: Sport, the Arts, Sex and Physical Accessibility

In the first segment, speakers shared their initiatives for building a more inclusive society. They sought collaboration and support from participants, who in turn asked clarifying questions.

Organisations that presented their projects included research and technology non-profit Trampoline; social enterprise Society Staples; volunteer running club Runninghour; theatre company The Finger Players; and consultancy firm Insight N Access.

“Can you volunteer as a mock interviewer? Can someone provide job shadowing, to show how accounting work is like?” asked Francis Tan, CEO of Trampoline.

¹ The [Disability Community Network \(DCN\)](#) comprises voluntary groups, social enterprises and relevant parties that aim to make sense of, represent, and act on the needs and gaps in the disability sector. It is part of a broader open collaboration initiative known as [socialcollab.sg](#). The DCN enables members to update one another on new developments and best practices, plug knowledge gaps collectively and collaborate on joint projects. The [first roundtable](#), on employment, was held in May. Two more meetings on [education](#) and [caregiver support](#) were held in August and November, respectively.

Mr Tan was referring to their [AHEAD \(Achieve Higher Employability Through Adapted Development\)](#) programme, which aims to support neurodiverse individuals with different abilities to transition to work.

“We tend to focus on the technical skills needed to perform a job,” said Mr Tan. “Yet it is other aspects like social communication, workplace behaviour and understanding work context that are the challenges.”

Challenges in social participation were an equal concern for [Society Staples](#). Co-founder Debra Lam talked about how persons with developmental disabilities had fewer opportunities to participate in community activities, especially after they leave special education schools at the age of 18.

This motivated Ms Lam to think about programmes that were more inclusive and age-appropriate. For example, [Different Dragons](#) is a dragon boating club that brings 29 paddlers with different disabilities, and their caregivers to train together every Sunday.



Cookies for the tea break by [Crunchy Teeth](#), a baking project by parents of youths with autism. Other refreshments were procured from [Project Dignity](#), a social enterprise that provides vocational training and employment to people with disabilities.

Also in the race for more accessible sport was [Runninghour](#), which pairs volunteers with people with disabilities to run together. The club boasts 340 running guides and 192 members — from the blind, deaf, and intellectually challenged, to wheelchair users. Its flagship event, [Run for Inclusion](#), will be held on 27 July this year at Punggol Waterway Park.

For the arts, Tan Beng Tian, Artistic Director of The Finger Players, and freelance writer and editor Alvan Yap shared about the production process for [Not in My Lifetime?](#), an inclusive theatre production based on Mr Yap's experiences as a special education teacher.

Aside from closed captioning and making the performance venue wheelchair-accessible, the production included less common features such as audio description, a touch tour, relaxed performances for audience members who are more sensitive to loud noises and bright lights, and a calm space for individuals who might be overstimulated.

Participants asked questions about programme evaluation, and key issues discussed included how to communicate impact to funders, whether metrics could capture the views of disabled people, and whether programmes should always be funded based on a business case.



A sign language interpreter (right) from the Singapore Association for the Deaf. Sign language interpretation is one way in which the deaf and hard-of-hearing can access information and events.

Local discussion about disability usually sidesteps the issue of sex, sexual desires and the need for love — subjects shared by Ian Leo, Founder and Partner at Insight N Access.

Mr Leo spoke about two conferences on disability that he had attended in Japan and Korea, and how sex was a topic participants did not avoid.

“Many people with disabilities are treated as sexless creatures, but nothing can stand in the way of Mother Nature,” he quipped. “Sex is a basic need of all human beings, yet for some reason it is considered taboo in Singapore.”

Sexuality education was a popular topic of discussion among participants. Special education professionals present said that they did not shy away from talking about sex. However, working with parents to guide students towards appropriate sexual behaviour remained a challenge; some were uncomfortable with exposing their children to matters pertaining to sex.

Questions for Ian

Mentimeter

Do you think we should provide and find sexual services for people with disabilities in Singapore?

Here's a book for recommendation:
https://books.google.com.sg/books/about/Special_Boys_Business.html?id=wGhzPgAACAAJ&source=kp_cover&redir_esc=y

Sex seems to be taboo all abilities round. But we forget to think about is that sex is more than dirt or sex. It's about self esteem, being able to keep emotionally healthy and self-assertiveness. Sex is beyond - sex. Any thoughts?

Using your experience, how do you think we can best respond to any clients that fear that their disability is hindering their ability to find a relationship?

If sex is meant to procreate, should persons with intellectual disabilities be allowed to procreate if they cannot look after themselves, much less a child of their own? Thought?

Was disability an issue for you when you were dating, got married and wanted to have kids?

People with autism are known to be socially impaired. But they too have sexual needs n fantasy. How could we best address it in our society especially for those who with autism having low adaptive skills? in our society

Please share your thoughts on how to approach sexuality education in SPED schools!

The Undateables series was shown on Netflix;; it brought different, controversial feelings. Not sure if this is ideal to provide such dating/sexual services for PWDs in Asian context... Now we need to break these stigmas here in Singapore.

Questions for Mr Leo were polled anonymously using the software Mentimeter.

Mr Leo made the point that sex is an act that should not be frowned upon, though it is important for people with disabilities to abide by socially-acceptable sexual norms, for instance, when and where it is appropriate to masturbate. Parents need to be persuaded to support educators in providing personalised education and guidance, he added.

Seminar on Disability-Led Norms of Inclusion²

The second segment of the meeting was a seminar by disability studies scholar Victor Zhuang, who talked about how individuals could build accessible cultures through cultivating disability-led norms.³

“We are in an open auditorium, with rows of seats, and a stage that I am standing in front of. I am wearing a watch, a white Oxford shirt with khaki pants as well as my favourite brown dress shoes.”

Such verbal descriptions might seem peculiar, but for the doctoral student, it can make events more accessible to disabled people — in this case, the blind.

Mr Zhuang distinguished accessibility from accommodation, which are often conflated when talking about disability: Accommodation is given to meet an individual need, while to be accessible means that no special adjustment needs to be made by disabled people.

Apart from physical accessibility, other areas of accessibility include cognitive and emotional accessibility, he added. Cognitive accessibility means that experiences and information are catered to different levels of cognition, such as easy-read formats.

Emotional accessibility takes into account how different people react differently to certain environments, smells or sights. Examples include issuing trigger and content warnings before sharing information that may be unpleasant or traumatic.

² For a more extensive discussion by Mr Zhuang, see:

http://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/ssr/PDF%20Format/SSR%20Snippets/2019%20Vol%201/Snippet%201_2019.pdf

³ The term “disability-led” implies that disability paradigms and experiences are the driving force behind practice.



Disability studies scholar Victor Zhuang (left), in conversation with IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Justin Lee (right).

The principle that underlies these ideas, said Mr Zhuang, is that disability is not about bodily imperfection or the loss of function, but about society's inability to cater to different bodies and minds, leading to barriers in culture and attitudes, and social norms that create the problem of exclusion.

"We must try our best to think and reflect on our practices, and how in perpetuating norms, we are actually deliberately excluding people," he said. "Creating true access is challenging, and we will make mistakes, but we must continue trying, admit our mistakes, and remain transparent throughout the entire process."

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If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.update@nus.edu.sg