

RAIL RELIABILITY IS TAIPEI TARGET ACHIEVABLE? A26
ANTI-HAZE BATTLE RESTORING PEATLANDS A GAME CHANGER A27

OPINION

THE STRAITS TIMES

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The Straits Times says

Walking the talk on inclusion

The woman who yelled at a partially disabled cleaner in a foodcourt was seen not only as a rude customer but also as an ugly Singaporean. She has since regretted her outburst and apologised. For this, she must be given some credit. If one refuses to acknowledge the harm of social prejudice, that would be indeed ugly. The foodcourt manager had, with a helpful intention, asked the cleaner if he would like to wear a badge indicating his disability. That, of course, was a misconceived idea. If anyone should wear a badge of self-description, shouldn't it be those who cause offence to others?

A gracious society, however, has no need of labels of any kind as that would only divide people. Rather than typecasting a person in a way that

limits his or her role or how an individual is treated, society has to be willing to give all an opportunity to earn a place in the sun. Schools, where good practices of character and outlook are formed more easily than later in life, offer a valuable platform for the transmission of socially inclusive values. The more mainstream students come into contact with special needs children, the better the chances of the latter's acceptance by society at large in adult life as well.

Mindsets play a key role in Singapore's quest for inclusiveness. A recent survey on people's experiences of inclusion in daily life and early education is instructive. It found that while Singaporeans support the idea of inclusion in principle, many

do not translate social ideals into everyday practice. For example, while most say that children with and without disabilities can study together, only half of parents polled were comfortable with having a special needs student sit next to their own child in class.

It is this gap, between the "talk" and the "walk", that needs to be bridged by individuals if Singapore is to make the transition to inclusiveness. This goes beyond creating hardware like ramps, lifts, parking spaces and toilets for the handicapped, often undertaken by the civic authorities. Inclusivity is also a personal and collective exercise in giving and taking. To gain social solidarity, one must be prepared to forgo something: this

could take the form of space or some amenity that is given up so the elderly can live in the midst of young communities. Or it could be giving some of one's time by moving slowly on a path that the frail also share. Or it could be forgoing extra-fast service when being attended to by a young rookie or a person with special needs.

Another crucial test of inclusiveness is the extent to which choices are made about the nature of interaction one has with others who are different. Whether it is a special needs child, a senior with dementia, or a deaf and mute cleaner, any tendency to avoid or berate them would betray the shallowness with which one recites the pledge of being "one united people".

HomeFront

The hard – and heart – part of inclusiveness for the disabled

A recent survey shows that many Singaporeans remain uncomfortable interacting with people with disabilities. To change mindsets, create more opportunities for interaction.



Theresa Tan

When I was in secondary school, I had a friend who hardly talked about her sister. The only thing I knew about her mysterious sibling was that she lived in the "Tampines home". I naively assumed that her parents were very rich, had two properties and that her sister was living at their home in Tampines.

It was only much later that I realised the Tampines Home was a home for people with intellectual disabilities. It was also at that point that my friend's reticence about her sister suddenly made sense.

When I was growing up in the 1980s and '90s, many families kept their disabled children mostly at home or in institutions – out of sight and out of the public's mind. They did so perhaps out of shame, fear or helplessness.

There were also few reasons to go out as there were few support services, much less job openings, for the disabled, compared to what is available now.

But it was also clearly in response to the lack of understanding by Singaporeans in general.

Given the segregation between most Singaporeans and the disabled, it comes as no surprise that two recent surveys found that a sizeable number of Singaporeans still feel uncomfortable interacting with the disabled and that the latter feel shut out from society.

This is disappointing, especially after all the efforts by the Government and charities to improve the lives of those with disabilities in the past decade.

Just take a look at the findings: The Lien Foundation survey of 1,000 people on their attitudes towards children with disabilities found that close to two-thirds of the respondents shared the belief that Singaporeans are willing to share public spaces with children with special needs, but are not willing to interact with them.

Half of the parents polled were uncomfortable about their child having to sit next to one with special needs in class.

As for the disabled themselves, a survey of 1,000 people with disabilities, released last Thursday by the National Council of Social Service (NCSS), found that 62 per cent of them do not feel they are included, accepted, given

opportunities to contribute or reach their potential by society.

It is no wonder they feel thus, given the survey findings that so many are uncomfortable interacting with them.

It is clear that the calls for inclusion of people with disabilities have not gained traction with many ordinary Singaporeans.

The Government has done a lot more for the disabled in the past decade, like giving more funding for education and therapy services, among other things, for children with special needs.

But the hard – and heart – part of changing mindsets to accept and include those with disabilities remains a challenge. And this is not something that can be achieved just by pouring money into it.

More needs to be done to promote inclusion. And there is some urgency in this, because the number of young children

diagnosed with developmental conditions, such as autism, speech and language delays and global developmental delay, has tripled in the past decade. Last year, about 4,000 children were diagnosed with developmental problems, up from about 1,300 in 2005.

Experts have said that about 5 per cent to 6 per cent of children born here have some form of developmental problem. With more diagnosed, more of those with mild conditions will go on to mainstream schools. Also last year, there were about 13,000 students – or about 2.7 per cent of the student population – with mild special needs or learning difficulties in mainstream schools. That's almost triple the number in 2006.

It is no longer inconceivable that your child may sit next to one with special needs at school.

The number of the disabled in Singapore is likely to rise.

Public education is needed to raise awareness of disability issues. Over one-third of those surveyed in the Lien Foundation poll said children with special needs are not part of their social circle. Even those who know a special needs child (through friends or relatives) say they are not always comfortable interacting with the child. The most common feelings they have in such interactions are empathy, pity and love.

More children may be diagnosed as awareness, detection and capabilities to manage these conditions improve. Singapore is also ageing rapidly, and old age and illness can render a senior disabled.

MINDSET SHIFTS

How does one change mindsets towards the disabled?

It is a no-brainer, but public education is needed to raise awareness of disability issues. Over one-third of those surveyed in the Lien Foundation poll said children with special needs are not part of their social circle. Even those who know a special needs child (through friends or relatives) say they are not always comfortable interacting with the child. The most common feelings they have in such interactions are empathy, pity and love.

This suggests that the lack of interaction and the concerns about their children sitting next to

a special needs child spring more from ignorance and uncertainty than prejudice. If so, the best way to change mindsets is through interaction, by creating ways to facilitate meaningful interaction between people with and those without disabilities. This can help correct misconceptions.

Charities that support those with disabilities, such as the Disabled People's Association (DPA) and SPD, have been holding talks to raise awareness about disability issues for years. The DPA goes to schools, offices and other organisations to get the public to understand what people with disabilities are going through and to think of how to ease the barriers.

Some students who attended these talks have gone on to run similar campaigns at their schools, said DPA executive director Marissa Medjeral-Mills.

On a larger scale, the NCSS also launched its disability awareness campaign last Thursday. Through a website (seethrueme.sg) and public talks on various disabilities as well as tips on how to communicate and interact with people with disabilities, among other measures, the NCSS hopes to promote inclusion.

Raising awareness aside, there also has been a greater push to promote inclusion and interaction between children with and those without disabilities.

For example, in 2012, the Education Ministry said the 20 special education schools for children with disabilities would be paired with mainstream schools, so that students from both schools have opportunities to mingle, for example, during recess and at school events.

In January, a charity started Singapore's first inclusive pre-school. At Kindle Garden, run by AWWA, children with disabilities learn and play alongside other kids in the same classroom. About 30 per cent of its children from 18 months to six years of age have disabilities, such as autism or Down syndrome.

School principal Lena Koh said both groups of children get along, play and learn together naturally, without fear or hesitation.

"Children do not discriminate or single out children with disabilities," she said. "It's the adults who tend to do that."

The pre-school is filled to its capacity of 75 children and has a waiting list of 138.

This is an encouraging sign. Research shows that children with classmates with disabilities learn how to interact with those who are different from them. They are more likely to develop positive self-esteem, confidence and leadership skills when their experience of such interactions is positive, said Dr Kenneth Poon, associate professor of early childhood and special education at the National Institute of Education.

Hopefully, with more Kindle Gardens around, more parents will find that it is not so scary to have their child playing or studying with a special needs kid after all.

And their children will form the foundation of a truly inclusive Singapore.

And those with disabilities will no longer be apart from society, but a part of it.

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