



CNA Commentary

Singapore Paralympians' gold medals shine, but radical inclusion will be the real prize

Singapore's diversity is woven into its multiracial, multicultural and multi-religious fabric. Including persons with disabilities is simply adding another layer to this diversity, say the Centre for Biomedical Ethics' Dr Michael Dunn, Dr Kathryn Muyskens and Harsh Hiwase.

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SINGAPORE: Singapore's Paralympians returned from Paris last week after a landmark showing at the Games, where they earned three medals – two gold and a silver.

As supporters turned up in droves, waving their flags and banners in support of their Paralympians during a celebratory open-top bus parade on Saturday (Sep 14), it was heartening to see Singaporeans embrace and celebrate the abilities of its differently-abled sportspeople.

Singapore has certainly come a long way in improving access and promoting inclusion for persons with disabilities.

In 2007, Singapore launched its first Enabling Masterplan, setting the direction for disability services and programmes. Now in its fourth iteration, the 2030 Enabling Masterplan promises further support in healthcare, education, public transportation and employment for persons with disabilities to make Singapore a more caring and inclusive place for all.

However, experts and members of the disabled community feel more can be done with regard to understanding disabilities and changing the way in which the wider society thinks of, includes and accepts persons with disabilities.



THE PROBLEM

Part of the problem stems from a mischaracterisation of disability. There's a tendency to equate disability with visible signs of physical impairment, overlooking the challenges faced by those with invisible disabilities.

A person in a wheelchair, missing a limb or holding a white cane is recognisably disabled and it is likely that a member of public will offer them assistance. Persons with invisible disabilities, however, may experience the same daily difficulties, but without the awareness of others.

Invisible disabilities include chronic pain disorders, cognitive dysfunction or mental illnesses that impact on a person's well-being in ways that require careful, individualised accommodation.

Singapore's policies have begun to address the needs of this group, but more work is needed.

One example is the LTA's Helping Hand Scheme, which started in 2019 and now includes lanyards that persons with invisible disabilities can wear on public transport to let people know they need the seat. But as CNA reporter Grace Yeoh found when she put it to the test in 2023 and was left standing, commuters may not always be as responsive as one might hope.

One roadblock to inclusion lies in how we think about persons living with disabilities.

Arthur Frank, in his 1995 book *The Wounded Storyteller*, writes about the different narratives of illness. He describes something called "the restitution narrative", which in many ways reflects how we view disability today.

In this narrative, illness (or disability) is seen as something to treat and overcome, which doesn't reflect the reality for many living with visible or hidden disabilities. This conflation between disability and illness can create a sense of pity among people in the community. But pity is far from empowering. In fact, pity can be paralyzing.

Think of the commuters on the MRT looking at CNA's Ms Yeoh. They may have understood that the lanyard indicated a hidden disability and may have felt some pity for her condition. But pity is not sufficient to guide action. It was not obvious to them what action would be appropriate in response.

This is not surprising. As author Susan Sontag describes in her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, compassion and pity are unstable emotions, and if they are not translated into action, they wither into apathy. When it isn't clear how we should respond to the pain of others, it is easy to do nothing at all.

Let us return now to the Paralympics. This is one prominent example where society has embraced people who have managed to overcome the odds and achieve something remarkable despite their impairments.

But here we also need to be careful.

There is a risk that when we overfocus on people who have overcome their disabilities in some extraordinary way, the implicit message being perpetuated is that a person with disabilities ought to strive to take on the same roles and achieve the same things as an abled person.

This leaves persons with hidden disabilities doubly invisible when their lives do not align with socially accepted markers of success.

TOWARDS RADICAL INCLUSION

These narratives set up patterns in society where persons with disabilities become the passive recipients of obligations, pity or praise. This dynamic falls short of inclusive practices that position persons with disabilities as equals within our society.

For a person with a disability, whether visible or hidden, being viewed as a passive recipient of care is not empowering. Neither is being expected to heroically overcome their condition before they can be accepted or valued by the community around them. So how can we do better?

To more helpfully reframe disability or chronic illness, we can look to another of Frank's narratives of illness: The quest narrative. This narrative views disability as a part of the human condition and an opportunity for growth. Socially, this narrative invites us to include persons with disabilities as they are, rather than being primarily responsive to specific needs, or to require persons with disabilities to overcome their difficulties.

This more radical form of inclusion means that society must shift its perspective away from what would "fix" or make up for a given disability, and towards recognition of the unique contributions persons with disabilities can make.

A WAY FORWARD

As a multiracial, multicultural and multi-religious society, diversity is woven into the very fabric of what it means to live in Singapore. Including persons with disabilities is simply adding another layer of diversity to the mix. So, in this sense, the groundwork for inclusion has already been laid. As members of this small island community, we share a responsibility to be accepting and compassionate as we work to better mesh our community together.

A step in this direction are the plans announced on Monday (Sep 16) to place an additional 4,500 more persons with disabilities into employment by 2030. This is part of efforts to raise the resident employment rate of this group to 40 per cent, up from 32.7 per cent in 2022/2023.

Comparatively, in Canada, 62 per cent of persons with disabilities have jobs, according to 2022 data. In Switzerland, the employment rate for this group is 68 per cent.

But, just as importantly, radical inclusion requires a shift in attitudes - rethinking how we approach our family and community relationships and changing how we think, see, and relate to all those we live with and alongside.

Everyday encounters with persons with disabilities should focus on embracing disability as a form of diversity from which we can all learn and grow. This means seeing challenges as opportunities, difference as potential, and constraints as mere barriers to overcome.

In the vein of the kampung spirit, we should accept that while we all come with different needs and abilities, each of us is a valuable and integral part of our diverse community.

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