Not Without Us

Perspectives on Disability and Inclusion in Singapore

"In much of public discourse, many of us hold firm to our own lived realities and views. This is expected; and not unlike the proverbial blind men describing the elephant only by the parts they can feel. Where perspectives can be shared and aggregated, therein stands a chance of a clearer larger picture to develop more effective actions for better life outcomes.

Not Without Us provides one cluster of perspectives of individuals wanting to see the disabled amongst us better included and embraced. It is valuable insight to further clarify the larger picture of what Singapore aspires to and can become. Added to perspectives of stakeholders not included here, it is great fodder for deeper dialogues across the public, private and people sectors. I am eager to see how the outcomes of these crucial dialogues can be validated, aggregated and then translated to a better life for the disabled and the rest of Singapore."

— **Denise Phua**
Chair, Autism Resource Centre (Singapore) and Autism Association Singapore;
Member of Parliament and Mayor of Central Singapore District

"What if we don't see disability as a lack but an invitation to redefine diversity and inclusion in humanity that we sorely need to evolve? Challenging the notion of disability was what got me to start Hush TeaBar with the Deaf at the centre of the experience design. In an environment where no spoken words are needed, who is the disabled one? What do we, the Hearing, learn from silence that can help us become better humans? We have come far with the Enabling Masterplans but we have much further to go in ensuring that policy design and social narratives are informed, and more importantly, led by those with lived experiences so that change is made not for them, but with them. *Not Without Us* is therefore an important contribution to the Singapore that we aspire to be, where disability becomes 'transparent' and inclusion a mere social norm."

— **Anthea Ong**
Social Entrepreneur, Impact Investor and Author;
Former Nominated Member of Parliament (2018–2020)

"There is an urgent need to de-Westernise Disability Studies and theorising about dis/ability. The time has come for us to revise the power-relations in academic knowledge-production in this field. This thought-provoking book contributes to that vital process of revision. It provides rich insights into how dis/ability is shaped by culture and social formations—and how the lives and perspectives of disabled people around the globe are similar and diverse. The book includes chapters that are 'traditionally-academic' in style, but many more that are not. This is something I welcome. Many of the contributions felt, to me, poetic—powerfully so—their writing being an act of celebration

or resistance. As such, the book challenges the reader to think anew about how we research and understand disability, rights and inclusion. I learnt much about disability in the context of Singapore from this text. The book reaffirmed my belief in the importance, and value, of inclusive and supportive editorship. It reminded me, once more, of the importance of personal narrative as a window into diversity of the disability-experience, of the different passions, perspectives and lives of disabled people internationally. The book invites the reader to think about their own assumptions and it does so in a way that is highly engaging."

— **Professor Angharad Beckett FRSA**
Centre for Disability Studies, University of Leeds

"I enjoyed reading the outstanding and well-prepared *Not Without Us* immensely, often linking diverse issues in the context of Singapore to universal issues and to the challenges in Japan, where I live. As expected of Dan Goodley as one of the editors, the book is inclusive, including persons with intellectual/learning disabilities among others. I find the analysis of ableism and meritocracy particularly useful, as the Secretary-General of Inclusion International.

I am fascinated by this book, accessible with artwork, at times quite funny, profoundly personal, and theoretical. It is a great pleasure to recommend it to those who are interested in (critical) disability studies, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), or Singapore studies, whether you are in 'non-liberal' societies like Singapore or not."

— **Nagase Osamu**
Eminent Research Professor, Institute of Ars Vivendi, Ritsumeikan University;
Co-Chair, East Asia Disability Studies Forum

"This book is an eye-opener for anyone in the disability sector in Singapore. A fresh breath, a playful twist, a heart-wrenching memory, a resolution… many discoveries in one unique Singaporean collection. Amazing work!

Reading it reframed how I look at myself, my children and the world around me. After so many years of living with disability, as a developmental paediatrician, a caregiver and lately as founder of CaringSG, I thought I knew enough. But now I realise it is still a mystery. There is so much more to understand, to learn, to accept, to imagine, and to love. Thank you *Not Without Us* for being a special song that I will hold dear for years to come, for reminding me why I started, and for the reasons to press on in this adventure."

— **Dr Lim Hong Huay**
Developmental Paediatrician; Caregiver; Board Chair and Founder of CaringSG

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Perspectives on Disability and Inclusion in Singapore

edited by
Kuansong Victor Zhuang
Meng Ee Wong
Dan Goodley

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Editors' Introduction:
Towards a Singapore Disability Studies

Kuansong Victor Zhuang, Meng Ee Wong and Dan Goodley

NOT WITHOUT US. For those familiar with the disability rights movement, the title of our collection references the slogan of the disability rights movement, *nothing about us without us*, which is a clarion call for disabled peoples' self-representation. In his 1998 book of the same title, *Nothing About Us Without Us,* James Charlton attributes the slogan to 1993,[1] when he heard disabled leaders in South Africa use the phrase. The ethos of *nothing about us without us* is also present in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and was adopted as the slogan of the International Day of Disabled Persons 2004.

But importantly, *not without us* also signals the links that Singapore has with the international disability rights movement. In 1981, disabled leaders from around the world—Ed Roberts, Vic Finkelstein, Bengt Lindqvist, among others—came to Singapore and founded Disabled Peoples' International, the first cross-disability international organisation of disabled people. They elected a Singaporean, Ron Chandran-Dudley as their first chairperson. Derrick Cogburn,[2] discussing disability rights in Southeast Asia, also highlights the importance of Singapore and 1981 in contributing to the current international focus on inclusion. 1981 also witnessed the blossoming of a nascent disability rights movement in Singapore.[3] Yet despite these linkages to the language of rights, what has emerged today as inclusion in Singapore has markedly different characteristics from what is typically expected of an inclusion based upon the idea of nothing about us without us.

This discussion about what *not without us* signifies serves as a segue into current discussions around inclusion in Singapore. There has been, since the mid-2000s, a distinct focus on including disabled people in Singapore. As this collection was being put together, the 4th Enabling Masterplan was published. The Enabling Masterplan, which serves as a guide and framework towards how inclusion can happen in Singapore, was first implemented in 2007. Disabled people and organisations are involved in its production and widely consulted in the formulation of the plans, but the kind of disabled leadership that was envisioned in *nothing about us without us* seems to have been co-opted into a state-led mechanism that involves the whole-of-society within the making of inclusion. We do not object to the workings of this apparatus of power, nor is this meant to be criticism of the Enabling Masterplan. Rather, in calling attention to *not without us*, we hope to invite deeper reflection on the state of play around inclusion, speaking both with and against inclusion in Singapore today. *Not without us* thus seeks to offer, not just a reminder of what might have been by signifying a past that is now silent, but also a future that may emerge, even within the contemporary era of inclusion. It reminds us that even while inclusion is embraced today, real inclusion is still an ideal yet to be realised, and that was and still is a struggle in Singapore.

As editors, we are pleased to see this collection come to fruition, given that it has been many years since the idea of it was first floated. The two Singaporean editors, Victor and Meng Ee, have always been interested in disability studies and have engaged in long conversations on how a Singapore disability studies would look like. Dan is a frequent visitor to Singapore, giving academic talks and fostering space for research collaboration. So, when the idea of doing an edited volume examining disability in Singapore came up in one of our many conversations and meetings, we were more than excited to explore how we could begin to do this.

Importantly, we situate the production of this volume amidst efforts to grow the space for a Singapore disability studies. And these efforts are

especially pertinent, given the increased scholarly attention on the academic study of disability globally. In the last 30 years or so, disability studies has seen increased interest and exponential growth in academic institutions in Britain and America. As a discipline, disability studies demands a critical re-thinking and re-examination of the ways in which we research, analyse and think about disability in our lives, with deep roots in activism that challenge societal norms and grounded upon the disabled ontologies and lives that give the discipline its name. In Singapore, small steps have been taken to build a nascent disability studies with the setup of a Facebook group dedicated to critical discussion,[4] and also an issue on exploring disability studies published in *s-pores*,[5] an e-journal dedicated to exploring new directions in Singapore studies in 2018. There is also a growing corpus of critical scholarship and research based on disability studies principles in Singapore.[6] Others, both Singaporean and foreign academics and researchers, have also contributed to this space with their efforts and visits to Singapore—Reuben Wong, Nagase Osamu, Tamar Heller, and many others. Our volume builds on these efforts; we hope it will be an important milestone in the right direction.

Remembering the principles of *not without us* was key as we set out to realise this volume. As academic researchers, we are cognisant of how academia can be ableist and continue to perpetuate problematic logics that serve to exclude. We started with a public call for contributions in March 2020, publicising across various outlets, including social media, online listservs and personal networks, inviting contributions in various mediums. The editors also took special care to guide and mentor contributors who required more support, ensuring that what emerged were chapters that could contribute meaningfully to the production of a Singapore disability studies. Importantly, while the volume is produced for the purpose of growing disability studies, and is thus naturally situated and coalesces around research, we are also careful not to perpetuate a sort of academic elitism in the volume. Thus, while the volume comprises academic research papers, policy critiques and analyses utilising

both humanities and social sciences research methods, it is also juxtaposed with papers written from personal and lived experiences of disability. Importantly, in offering a diversity of mediums throughout the volume, what we hope to do is to also invite questions on how disability research could and should look like.

We see the volume's key contribution as shifting the focus from disability as simply the passive subject of study. In his own experiences in academia, Meng Ee, who works at the National Institute of Education, notes how disability research in education tends to see disabled people as simply to be studied. In other academic fields, disability also tends to be seen as an issue that needs to be solved or a condition in need of cure. The cast of disabled scholars and researchers in this volume thus offers a different perspective on how things could be. And when it is non-disabled scholars writing about disability, they do so in a way that respects and actively seeks to amplify disabled peoples' voices and to critically examine the conditions of inclusion. *Not without us,* we hope, will shift the weight of things towards centring disability, and return agency to disabled people.

And it is also this theme of *not without us* that the reader will find embedded in the cover chosen for the book. The image is shot by Isabelle Lim, a freelance photographer who is deaf and was born with Nager syndrome. The photograph features "Wheelsmith" Danial Bawthan and ShiGGa Shay in a dance as they rap in the music video for "Fire in the Rain", which was directed by acclaimed Singaporean auteur Royston Tan. "Fire in the Rain" was produced as part of "See the True Me", a five-year public education campaign spearheaded by the National Council of Social Service. Launched in 2016, the campaign represents a concerted effort by state agencies to build greater inclusivity by changing public mindsets about disability. Other disabled performers, such as Adelyn Koh, Joshua Allen German, Sarah Jane, Charlene Wong, dancers from local deaf hip-hop dance group Redeafination and Isabelle Lim, also performed in the video. As the music video's YouTube

caption proclaims, the video (and correspondingly, the campaign) asks that we "look beyond disabilities, [so that] persons with special needs can contribute to society."[7] In the slick music video, the abilities of the disabled performers are clear for all to see.

For us, the editors, the moment captured in this photo—the rap/dance between "Wheelsmith" Danial Bawthan and ShiGGa Shay—signifies the way inclusion is often thought about in Singapore, in moving away from a simplistic affirmation of disability rights, to a more complex interwoven and intricate relationship between disabled and non-disabled people. In dance, there is often a need to read each other's movements, so as not to bump into one's partner. Without clear boundaries governing the rights of disabled people, there are times when bumps occur, such as when people or systems discriminate against the disabled. It is at these ruptures that we see the limits of state-led inclusion. Yet, the dance of inclusion resumes after this momentary pause, often in the way that it has been initially choreographed.

But the embrace of state-led inclusion is not what this volume is about. Instead, the behind-the-scenes shot signals a need for a more critical examination of the experience of disability behind the façade of inclusion. We sit with disability as an essential element of the human condition. We argue that sitting with disability—as we might sit with the photograph (and its making)—highlights how one's disability can offer a different kind of orientation to the world. As Isabelle Lim writes in her LinkedIn, her disability "sharpens [her] sense of seeing" while she waits to capture the right moment.[8] Danial Bawthan, who also performed at the 2019 National Day Parade, proclaims proudly in *And Suddenly I Disappear*, the first disabled-led theatre production in Singapore, that "this [disabled] body is dangerous, it desires, it delights, it delivers, it dances". Disability is who they (or we) are and influences their (or some of our) lived experiences; it is not something that can be simply displaced. The claiming of disability ultimately is a key and central theme of *Not Without Us*, to recognise disability as a form of positive embodiment,

and generative form of identity and knowledge, both internationally and in an inclusion that is proceeding at full steam in Singapore.

Introducing Critical Disability Studies: from the global to the local

When one considers the state of the field of disability studies in the second decade of the 21st century, it is perhaps best to consider this field as a mature and advanced interdisciplinary global community of scholars, researchers, advocates and artists. One of us—Dan—has argued that we might consider the field as *critical* disability studies.[9] Critical Disability Studies starts "with disability but never end[s] with it: disability is *the* space from which to think through a host of political, theoretical and practical issues that are relevant to all".[10] A disability studies that is critical is one that is self-critical and self-aware of the possibilities but also the challenges of foregrounding disability as the primary concern, whilst being sensitive to the many intersectional connections with other matters of marginalisation and discrimination.

Over the last three decades distinct models of disability and communities of disability scholars have grown, in various national contexts, emphasising disability's minority status (North America), socio-economic foundation (United Kingdom), cultural location (Australia and North America), relational constitution (Nordic countries), bio-psycho-social character (supranational perspectives such as World Health Organisation and United Nations) and colonial imprints (including Africa, Asia and South America).[11] These models and perspectives of disability share an ambition: to radically shift the ways in which we understand disability and by extension how we understand the human condition. Historically, disability has been cast as an individual problem, a medicalised pathology and a psychological deficit. And these ideas and discourses still dominate our everyday ways of thinking about disability. In contrast, social, cultural, minority and relational models of disability demand us all to think differently *about* disability, *with* disabled people, guided by the voices and aspirations *of* disabled people. *Nothing about us, without us.*

When one considers the state of the field, one has to be particularly attuned to questions of universality and the dangers of creating disability perspectives that seek global answers to often very local problems. The disability experience (if there is such a thing) of a Singaporean and British disabled person will, of course, share many aspects, not least the experience of exclusion from mainstream life in each of these national contexts. However, we need to be also sensitive to the particularities and specificities of local and national contexts for the lives of disabled people.

Take, for instance, the social model of disability. While the social model of disability has been incredibly powerful in identifying and eradicating the barriers that marginalise people with sensory, physical and cognitive impairments, it is important to recognise that this model was born in Britain. Hence, any notion of transporting this model from the British to the Singaporean context brings with it a number of questions. Life as a Singaporean disabled person will be very different to that of a British disabled person and each of these positionalities will be marked by class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and culture. One reason for putting this volume together relates to the need to foreground the Singaporean experience in relation to disability. And while much can be learnt from other national and intellectual contexts we hope that this collection brings new disability insights—emerging from the Singaporean context—that might actually have been missing from previous articulations of disability around the world.

A focus on Singapore brings with it the need to sit with local historical, cultural, social and economic conditions as well as be mindful of a wider global politics of disability. So, while we can argue that there is an urgent need to address the educational, health, artistic, familial and employment realities of disabled people across the world, how these realities play out in the Singapore context will be contingent on a number of localised factors even as they are situated within a global emergence of disability.

This is especially so because of how the world has woken up to disability over the last two decades. The global desire for knowing disability is perhaps

best captured by the 2011 WHO/World Bank World Report on Disability.[12] We value this administrative impulse to understand the current situation of disabled people and to respond legislatively in a uniform and consistent manner. Both the World Report and United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities[13] are driven by an ambition to capture the realities and concerns of disabled people across the world in relation to issues such as education, healthcare and employment. We know that disabled people share common experiences that can be understood in terms of disablism: defined by Carol Thomas "as a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well being".[14] This collection, while written from the Singaporean context, contributes to a global disability discourse that seeks to understand the disability experience in ways that might be helpful to disabled people across the world.

And as we have hinted at the start of this introduction, there is added impetus for this volume and a critical approach towards disability, given how the inclusion of disabled people in Singapore is today a matter of great urgency. From government masterplans, to celebrations of disability, from public education campaigns to public pledges to be inclusive, Singapore has begun to wholeheartedly embrace disabled people as part of the nation. Disabled people have also begun to be more visible in media reports, public life and society. And yet, we feel that there remains much more to be understood about the experience of disability in a Singapore that aspires to be inclusive.

If as a discipline, disability studies demands a critical re-thinking and re-examination of the ways in which we research, analyse and think about disability in our lives, then the present inclusion in Singapore, which does not hinge on the embrace of disability rights legislation, provides an opportunity to turn to disabled experiences. This can illuminate what it means to be included and allow Singapore's experience of disability to add to theories developed in disability studies. Our next section on language use illuminates some of the local peculiarities and considerations in doing disability studies in Singapore.

Disability nomenclature, or Singapore's uniqueness

Both local and international readers would find the choice of disability nomenclature obvious and peculiar throughout the volume. Internationally, how disability discourse and language is used across and within different national contexts has been a key source of contestation. In a British context, for example, the term 'learning disabilities' has been most commonly deployed over the last two decades to refer to those learners who have cognitive impairments which impact their ability to learn. This term eventually replaced the incredibly dehumanising label of 'mental handicap' that has unfortunately dominated medical and educational contexts for many years of the 20th century. In recent years it has been common to find references to people with learning disabilities and/or autism, testimony to an increased recognition of people with autism which, in some cases, is differentiated from those people who are considered to have more general learning disabilities. Meanwhile, in health and medical contexts, we have witnessed the common use of the term 'intellectual disabilities', which some advocates believe places our language more in line with other national contexts (especially the USA and Canada). And while these labels shift in terms of their meaning and usage, many people so-labelled prefer the usage of People First language: emphasising that while people might have learning disabilities, the primary identity marker is that of being a human being—a person first. This very brief overview of the shifting discourse around learning disabilities in the UK—an overview that inevitably fails to capture the complexity of debates and mobile nature of disability discourse—demonstrates a simple though profound point: disability language is debatable.

Those familiar with these issues and the debate around disability language will notice that there is a wide range of nomenclature used in discussing and describing disability throughout this volume. There is the very 'proper' use of 'persons with disabilities', which as Wong Meng Ee and Levan Lim highlight

is very much in vogue in Singapore.[15] Some of the chapters use identity-first language, a trend emerging both internationally and in Singapore where disabled people prefer to identify with their disabilities, which are an integral part of who they are. For instance, some would prefer to be called autistic or neurodiverse rather than 'person with autism'. These chapters will use the term 'disabled people'. These reflect what Jonathan Tiong, who lives with spinal muscular atrophy, highlights in a *Today* commentary, where he aptly notes that "I am disabled and you call me that", rather than some "pointless semantics and political correctness".[16] There is also the use of terminology associated with special education needs in Singapore in some of the chapters. As Wong Meng Ee and Levan Lim explain, this has been used to describe students requiring support in both mainstream and special education in Singapore, and reflects the larger historical changes in the field of special education in the UK and heralds a key focus on the child's education needs.[17]

In curating this volume as editors, we have chosen not to police the use of these terms, even as we have our own preferences around disability language. We do so because we fundamentally believe that it is more important to highlight the issues around disability and inclusion and to show how we can, from different fields and perspectives, do disability research that support the aims of *not without us.*

A Singapore Disability Studies

A key aim of *Not Without Us* is to centre disability, both in terms of self-representation and also to offer provocations on how research and disability studies scholarship can centre lived experiences of disability. This is ultimately one of the emergent issues that disability studies and the international disability rights movement have surfaced over the years. In particular, the focus has been to highlight and centre the voices of disabled people who have previously been silenced, sidelined and marginalised in society due to a variety

of reasons—segregated, discriminated, medicalised, institutionalised, and so on. And even as inclusion is being embraced both locally and globally, there are disabled people who find it harder to be heard—especially those who have been labelled with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.

This is also why we begin our volume with a section that highlights disabled people's lived experiences. The opening chapter by Dawn-joy Leong and Cavan Chang, both neurodivergent, considers the questions of inclusion in Singapore from their lived experiences as proud Autistic and person with Down Syndrome, respectively. By conveying their thoughts through an interwoven tapestry of communicative mediums including words and pictures, Dawn and Cavan spotlight what it means to speak, both within the current milieu supporting inclusion and also within academic research and writing that privileges the written word.

The next two chapters turn the attention to different lived experiences of disability. Tan Siew Ling who is deaf/blind speaks about how assistive technology mediate her interactions with the world, and the issues that she encounters as she goes about her everyday life. Initially written as shorter Facebook posts, Siew Ling weaves these everyday encounters of/with disability into a nascent critique of the ways in which society structures both support and inhibit her communication with the world, paying attention to the ways in which disabled people are also active agents in their interactions with the world. Xie Yihui's chapter reflects on her own identity as a disabled foreign student living in Singapore, and discusses the implications of coming to embrace her own disabled identity and the larger community, but also of her struggles interacting with societal structures both locally and overseas.

Moving from the focus on the intersections of lived experiences of disability with the world, the next series of chapters highlights ways in which disability research can afford a praxis to think critically about disability, both as a form of embodied experience and also what it means to speak about, of and for disability. Interviewing d/Deaf interlocutors, Timothy Loh examines

the politics of sign language in Singapore, arguing how the debates around 'correct' sign language in Singapore are connected to the broader politics of language use in Singapore, in particular, the Speak Good English Campaign and education reforms such as bilingualism. Cat Chong's lyrical essay, written from their embodied experiences of disability, interlaces contemporary poetics and accessible prose to consider the practices involved in continually negotiating a chronic illness within the context of Covid-19 in Singapore. Focusing on the voices of caregivers (mothers of people with autism), Bella Choo amplifies the diverse voices of mothers and their struggles to navigate public spaces as they resist the uninformed (and often harsh) judgements of the public by simply stepping out of the house with their autistic children, offering a key perspective to the spatiality of disablement of caregivers. And rounding up the section, A. R. speaks from the perspective of her lived experiences as an autistic and racial minority, but also considering how her grief for the victims of ableism offers an opportunity to think through structural realities towards building communities and structures for and by disabled people.

The chapters in section two are structured around disability representation in arts and culture, and are meant to be read as a series of conversations. A key outcome of the focus on inclusion in Singapore has been an increased focus on how the arts and culture can offer possibilities for disabled people, artists and practitioners, but has also seen an uptick in media representations of disability as well as a number of organisations keen to support disabled people's forays into the arts and cultural spheres. We begin with an interview with disability arts practitioner, Grace Lee-Khoo, who discusses a performance she put up around dementia with her father, Tan Tok, a retiree who lives with Alzheimer's. From a disability-led perspective, Grace offers insights into how dementia, a medical condition often associated with growing old, can also offer generative and radical insights not only for art and performance, but also for what it means to be living with dementia.

The next three chapters focus on how disability arts are supported, conceptualised, and contested and negotiated in Singapore. Written from the perspective of the Singapore International Foundation, Geraldine Chin's chapter examines various initiatives that the Foundation has embarked on in recent years to build disability inclusion through the arts, highlighting what it means for an organisation to support disabled art practitioners. Discussing the introduction of art curriculum within special education, Ivy Chia and Eunice Tan spotlight two artists with autism, Glenn Phua and Sean Bay and their skilful artwork. Chia and Tan argue for a need to move away from a current deficit educational model into an ability-driven one where the focus is on cultivating talent and interests of the disabled student, especially in the arts, so as to further the goal of inclusion in Singapore. Writing from his perspective as the playwright for *Not in my lifetime?*, a play about special education in Singapore, Alvan Yap ponders the emergence of disabled-led productions and its impact of the production of disability arts in Singapore, as well as broader structural and systemic issues present within the growth of disability arts.

Rounding up section two, the next two chapters move from artistic representations of disability to consider disability within broader cultural representations, in particular, media representation and video game representation. Discussing the differences in disability representations across English and Chinese television channels, Aaron Ho argues for the importance of more progressive representations of disability, specifically noting the casting of a disabled actor in Channel 5's *Kin* as the ideal way of portraying disability on screen. Moving to video games, a ubiquitous experience for many Singaporeans, Sherry Toh makes the case for applying *nothing about us without us* in the game industry. As a disabled game reviewer for a leading game magazine, *PCGamesN*, Sherry argues that real disabled representation and accessibility in video games cannot be overlooked in the pursuit of inclusion.

Our final section moves from the now of inclusion to the future. It begins with Justin Lee's discussion of what inclusion means. Noting that inclusion

can encompass many possible dimensions and contestable meanings, Justin argues that where possible inclusion should become unremarkable and part of the 'natural' order of things. The next two chapters spotlight education for disabled students in Singapore. In his chapter, ME discusses the place of Pathlight School within the special education system, situating it within the national narrative and ideology of meritocracy in Singapore. Utilising data from interviews with 26 disabled students across various universities in Singapore, Damaris Carlisle documents the issues students face, even as universities have paid greater attention towards supporting inclusion in recent years. Taken together, the two chapters on education consider what inclusion can look like and how it should be shaped to better meet the needs of disabled people.

We move from education to how other sites of inclusion could be envisioned. In her ethnographic study of Dignity Kitchen, Yeo Kia Yee highlights how the social enterprise endeavours to train disabled people towards employment, but also how work is itself normative. She argues the need to re-examine and reconceptualise the meaning of work so as to dismantle able-bodied norms. For Fadiah Johari, writing as a psychiatric user and survivor, the site of the institution needs to be critiqued and examined for its pro-treatment bias. While highlighting the need for persons with mental illnesses to seek help and professional treatment, she points out the issues within hegemonic ideals of recovery and examines how alternative peer support spaces can afford different alternatives to psychiatric institutions and medical narratives of recovery. In his chapter, Daryl Yang discusses the state of disability self-representation in organisations that serve disabled people. Arguing for a critical rights-based approach to disability, Daryl considers how we can increase disabled self-representation across different facets of society. And summing up our collection is a chapter that is written from the perspective of disability, but which utilises her own experience of neurodiversity to critique the dominant structures of meritocracy, or what Jocelyn Tay highlights as a rigged game.

The value of a Singapore Disability Studies

While we take a critical stance towards inclusion as it is unfolding in Singapore, we do not argue against inclusion as it is unfolding. Rather, when taken as a whole, the chapters in our collection add to the chorus of diversity that is embedded within notions of inclusion. And that ultimately is the value of a critical Singapore Disability Studies, one which embraces the values of disability research in ways aligned to the principles of the disability rights movement.

So, at the risk of being overly prescriptive, we hope that this collection serves as an inspiration for anyone who would pick up and read this book. The use of "inspiration" is deliberate, because for far too long has disability been used as inspiration in wrong ways. We want to inspire the reader to not only consider how we can all contribute to building a better society, but also to inspire us to consider the wealth of knowledge that can emerge when disability is used in such generative ways. This is especially pertinent in a meritocratic Singapore where success and achievement are emphasised and celebrated, wittingly or unwittingly to the subtle detriment of disabled people. Disability Studies then is an outlet to cultivate empathy, to offer a voice where disabled persons are otherwise located in the margins of society. Through a disability studies perspective, it opens up a dialogue, an opportunity for investigation to consider how society treats their disabled persons and fosters a closer conduit between disabled and non-disabled persons. And it is ultimately our vision that even as we continue to pursue inclusion, we will eventually move towards one that truly embraces and centres disability.

Endnotes

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