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Reimagining Special Education: Transforming Lives Through Social Role Valorization

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Abstract

Traditional special education programmes often emphasize functional curricula with minimal expectations, leading to segregation and limited life opportunities for students with disabilities. This article explores the transformation of The Ashish Centre through Social Role Valorization (SRV), shifting from a functional curriculum to one that fosters valued social roles, dignity, and real-world competencies. Through curriculum redesign, experiential learning, and inclusive pedagogical strategies, students gained agency, self-worth, and meaningful roles in society.

Keywords: Special education, Social Role Valorization, inclusion, experiential learning, dignity, curriculum transformation, disability empowerment.

Special education programmes have traditionally been known for their functional curricula, which focuses on life skills, and activities of daily living. Very little is expected of the students and they usually transition into a sheltered workshop where again expectations are minimal. Students are treated like children and "outings " in large groups are arranged for them. They are congregated and segregated with no hope of belonging to the larger community.

Compliance is the main objective of the teachers and students who don't " listen" are branded as having challenging behaviours. Sometimes aversive techniques are used to control this behaviour. In my role as an educational and vocational consultant, I support The Ashish Centre for the Differently Abled where we also followed a functional curriculum. At Ashish, we serve students predominately from the economically weaker sections who have developmental disabilities including autism, intellectual disability, and cerebral palsy. Most of our students have high support needs.

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In 2017 Ashish introduced me to Social Role Valorization a concept developed by Wolf Wolfenesberger. Initially, it was just theory to me, but during a collaborative assessment with some SRV leaders Elizabeth Neuville, Thomas Neuville, and Milton Tyree, I saw its potential to transform students' lives. Although the early changes were small, ongoing SRV training and reading during COVID helped me internalize SRV deeply. We recognized that the functional programme being followed at Ashish limited students' roles and reflected the low expectations that we had of the students. This led to a change not only in the curriculum but a change in pedagogy.

Social Role Valorization or SRV as it is commonly called is a set of ideas designed to improve the lives of marginalised people through the development of valued social roles. People who have valued social roles are more likely to get the " good things of life". So, what are the good things of life? "While there are differences between people and societies as to what constitutes the good things of life, there is a general consensus that the following are things that people usually consider the good things of life -including but not limited to – family, home, belonging to a community, friends, meaningful work, security and safety, to be able to have opportunities, discover abilities, skills and talents, to be treated with respect and dignity, to be treated as an individual and having agency over one's life." (Wolfensberger, 1996)

Human beings judge – it's a part of being human. Everything we perceive whether it be things we see, places we visit, the food we eat, and most importantly other human beings are evaluated either negatively or positively and these judgements are largely unconscious. (Thomas, 2023) We all know that first impressions matter – in fact, it's been said that we judge people within 30 seconds to 2 minutes of meeting them. These judgements may be positive or negative. Devaluation of people occurs when they are perceived negatively. People who look different, people who behave differently, people who are poor, people who are old, and the list goes on-these are all people who are at a high risk of devaluation. "WHO gets devalued varies from society to society, but one can predict it by looking at WHAT society values" (Keystone Institute, Lemay Consultants,Valor & Solutions,Valoris, 2024). Indian society values education, competence, " to stand on one's own feet" or independence, intelligence (how often have we heard parents boast about their children standing first in class"), looks particularly fair skin, hard work, money, achievements, and many more. People who struggle to meet these standards are devalued. Devaluation results in people being at risk of having the bad things of life done to them.

You may wonder what this has to do with disability and special education. Students with disabilities are subject to many wounding experiences. "Wounds refer to the negative life experiences which cause people who have been devalued emotional, psychological and physical pain". (Keystone Institute, Lemay Consultants,Valor & Solutions,Valoris, 2024) . One of the most prevalent "wounds" is the perception of individuals with disabilities being seen as "eternal children."

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Regardless of their age, they are often treated as if they were children. This mindset has significant consequences; for instance, students with disabilities may not be exposed to the same experiences as their neurotypical peers. The teaching and learning materials provided to them are frequently not age appropriate. A case in point was a picture I saw on a special school's website, which showed a young woman, around 19 to 20 years old, playing with plastic links typically used by one-year-olds. This leads to the infantilisation of people with disabilities and low expectations.

Another wound is that of disrespect, and the disregard for a person's dignity.. People are rarely given choices about their lives because it is assumed that they don't understand. Both parents and teachers are guilty of this – even small choices like what to wear, and what to eat are often decided for them by default.
Privacy is another overlooked aspect with children and adults subjected to indignities such as a 10 year old boy being bathed in public with a hose pipe and adults being undressed with no consideration for who was around them.

Congregation and segregation are also common wounds. People with disabilities are kept at " a distance and apart from, people who were positively valued (the opposite of being included and having access to the places where ordinary life is carried out) (Thomas, 2023). We often see this in segregated performances– whether in art, sports, or cultural activities.

These are only a few of the wounds that people with disability experience .Often they become objects of pity or ridicule. Some see them as less than human or even as burdens on society. They are denied experiences and opportunities that neurotypical students are given because they supposedly "can't understand." Life-wasting activities or "time-pass" activities are often assigned to them due to low expectations.
However, most of these wounds are inflicted unconsciously. " Most devaluation and the harm that it does happens unconsciously. This makes devaluation difficult (though not impossible) to address…… Almost EVERYONE has a hard time admitting their own social devaluations and outright deny that they could devalue other people" (Keystone Institute, Lemay Consultants,Valor & Solutions,Valoris, 2024).

To counter devaluation SRV suggests that people be encouraged to develop valued social roles through competency enhancement and image enhancement.
When I studied this it led to deep introspection – I realised I was also guilty of inflicting wounds on the people I serve. I decided that this must change and proposed a plan to change the curriculum and teaching methods at Ashish. The management was extremely open to this. This initiative not only involved putting an entirely new curriculum in place but also training the teachers in the ideas of SRV.

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The functional curriculum we had followed was based on the premise of low expectations, and we decided to change that. The school had the rhythm and routine of a special school. To understand how neurotypical schools function, teachers visited one. Students were reassigned to classes based on age rather than ability. Class names were updated to align with a typical school environment. The structure of the classes was also changed.

Previously, we had one-on-one sessions, with one teacher instructing while the remaining three to five students engaged in group activities. This led to excessive waiting time, reducing engagement and increasing escape behaviours. We researched global best practices and adopted the workstation system, where two to three students worked with a teacher. Initially, teachers resisted the change, but they quickly embraced it when they saw students becoming more focused and less prone to distraction.

As I applied SRV the principle of "no goals without roles" became central. The curriculum that was followed for the vocational interns was based on the “readiness model” with the young adults doing simulated tasks which had no meaning. The challenge was to craft new roles and to do that we focused on three principles – studying the ordinary and the importance of providing real work and the interest of the interns. This was difficult as Ashish is a segregated environment. But we managed and the interns are now cooking, making jewelry and other items for sale at exhibitions – leading to the development of new roles like salesperson, cashier, etc. After successfully implementing our initial approach, we extended it to the school. We examined the lives of neurotypical students of similar ages and identified the various roles they assumed. These roles included being a student, a son or daughter, a family member, a sportsperson, an artist, a gamer, a technology enthusiast, a chef, a friend, a dancer, a musician, a moviegoer, a restaurant patron, a customer, and a fashion enthusiast, among others.

In contrast, when we analyzed the roles of our students, we found that their opportunities were significantly limited. They were primarily students and family members, with some occasionally participating as sportspersons, performers, or artists—but often in segregated events. We carefully studied the roles of neurotypical students, and the skills required to develop them, integrating these skills into our curriculum.
In India, students up to the age of 15 are required to study multiple subjects. Accordingly, we included Science, Environmental Studies (EVS), Mathematics, Language Arts, Art and Craft, and Cooking in our curriculum. We also made a fundamental shift in pedagogy, transitioning from a behavioral approach to experiential learning. We firmly believe that the most effective learning occurs through direct experience—"learning by doing"—and that education should be meaningful and relevant. We strive to integrate this philosophy into all aspects of our teaching.
For example, in language instruction, particularly for younger students, we employ multimodal techniques. When teaching the word "apple," we introduce a real apple for students to see, touch, and smell.

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We describe its color and texture, assist them in cutting and tasting it, and show a video that provides additional information. We then create a PowerPoint presentation incorporating everything they have learned. Understanding is assessed through adapted worksheets and the Avaz app, where students respond to teacher prompts by selecting appropriate pictures or words.

Similarly, in science,` we follow an experiential approach. When teaching the water cycle, we show videos and PowerPoint presentations before engaging students in related experiments..

We introduce new vocabulary associated with the topic and assess comprehension through worksheets and the Avaz app. In EVS, if students are learning about different types of houses—such as those made of mud versus those constructed with bricks and mortar—they build models to reinforce their understanding. When studying the importance of cleanliness, they participate in classroom cleaning activities.

In Mathematics, before students go shopping, they learn about different denominations of currency and how to use a calculator to determine change. We also utilize models and videos to teach concepts such as fractions, multiplication, and division.

History lessons are made engaging by incorporating field trips. Before visiting historical monuments in Delhi, students watch videos and PowerPoint presentations to gain context, ensuring they appreciate the significance of the sites they explore. While our curriculum remains competency-based, we also aim to enrich students' lives through diverse experiences, identifying their interests along the way.

To further support our non-speaking students, we implemented an augmentative and alternative communication system using the Avaz app. Teachers received training on its application, and currently, fifteen students actively use the app, demonstrating notable progress in self-expression. Initially, many were unfamiliar with how to use the app for meaningful communication, but over time, they began using it spontaneously. A significant moment occurred when a non-speaking student, feeling unwell, independently navigated to the "Help" folder, selected "Not Well," and then pointed to "Go Home," effectively communicating his needs without prompting. This example underscores how Avaz empowers students and enhances their autonomy.

Beyond communication, Avaz has also proven to be an effective teaching tool across subjects such as Language, Mathematics, Science, and EVS. It facilitates comprehension assessment, reinforces concepts, and makes learning interactive. By integrating Avaz into classroom activities, we have observed increased student engagement and participation.

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These measures have led to greater student engagement and a reduction in behaviors of concern. Interest in Science and EVS has increased, with some students requesting more in-depth knowledge. Others have expressed a desire to learn to read, prompting us to introduce adult literacy techniques and age-appropriate materials. One student, who had been rejected from a neurotypical school in Class 9 and had lost interest in academics due to negative experiences, rediscovered his enthusiasm for Science and Mathematics after six months. He also demonstrated a keen aptitude for Art and is now preparing for his NIOS exams in these subjects.

We also focused on improving students' social image. Congregation often leads to segregation, and since Ashish operates in a segregated setting, we sought to mitigate its effects. Instead of taking students shopping in large groups, we arranged for one or two students to go with a teacher. Initially, teachers were skeptical, but they recognized the value when shopkeepers began inquiring about absent students.

Many parents struggled to take their children out, and most students had never visited Delhi's landmarks or traveled outside the city. We organized trips within Delhi to sites like Humayun's Tomb and the Waste to Wonder Park. Senior students and interns also participated in trips to Bhimtal and the Jim Corbett Wildlife Reserve, traveling in small groups of four to five students.

Personal appearance plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions. We ensured that students arrived at school well-groomed and appropriately dressed. Classrooms were decluttered, with outdated or age-inappropriate materials removed.

Language also shapes perceptions. While "children" is a common way to address students, this term is often inappropriately extended to adults with disabilities, reinforcing the harmful stereotype of perpetual childhood. To address this, we emphasized the importance of referring to individuals according to their actual age. The impact of this change was evident in one of our interns, a 22-year-old woman who initially identified as a child due to her short stature. She socialized primarily with younger children at her hostel. After six months in Ankur's vocational unit, where she was treated as an adult, she gained confidence and insisted on commuting independently—a journey requiring metro and e-rickshaw transfers. She successfully acquired the role of a commuter.

We maintained strict oversight of teaching materials to ensure age-appropriate content. Initially, some teachers used videos intended for young children with students aged 15-16. Through training and supervision, we corrected this practice and emphasized the use of respectful and developmentally suitable materials.

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Another issue we addressed was the participation of students in segregated performances. Many organizations requested our students to perform at events that were neither inclusive nor meaningful. These performances often reduced students to objects of pity or ridicule. Through training in Social Role Valorization (SRV), our staff recognized the harm in such activities, and as an organization, we stopped sending students to segregated events.

Classroom supervision focused on fostering a natural, prosodic tone and reducing excessive prompting. We also sought to minimize the use of reinforcement techniques commonly found in behavioral models, which, in theory, should be faded but are often not. Unlike neurotypical students, who are not constantly praised or rewarded for routine tasks, we worked toward fostering intrinsic motivation in our students.

To align our school environment with neurotypical settings, we introduced bulletin boards in hallways, with each class responsible for updates. In classrooms, we removed prominently displayed visual schedules, placing them in folders for older students while retaining them for younger classes. Supports and accommodations remained in place where necessary. Each class had bulletin boards showcasing student work, and we implemented structured routines akin to those in neurotypical schools. The effectiveness of these efforts was validated when a visitor remarked that our classrooms closely resembled those of neurotypical schools.

Parents responded positively to these changes and began setting higher expectations for their children. We reinforced this progress through training workshops for parents and teachers, emphasizing the principles of respect, dignity, choice, interdependence, and the dignity of risk. Changing deeply ingrained beliefs is challenging, but we believe we have taken an important step in the right direction.

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