

Personal Sharing of Touch Ubi Hostel(TUH) – Model for Community Inclusion

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1. Selecting the issue

There are many issues regarding special education: the lack of coordination amongst special schools and the adults centre in the provision of pre-vocational trainings, the lack of understanding and cooperation amongst the different special school, the lack of financial and moral support for the special education workers have caused some to be discouraged & to give up along the way before realizing their dreams, a lack of quality of life- e.g recreation, social life for many of our special people, the lack of awareness of service providers among parents. In order to provide better education/ training and support for our special people, their families and our fellow special education workers, there is still a lot more to be done.

2. Awareness of Residential Arrangements for people with intellectual disabilities in Singapore: amongst parents and special educators

During the course, I had the privilege to hear sharing of parents of children with special needs, and also teachers from the mainstream. I realized that there are still many people who are not aware of the various service providers for people with special needs. The care of people with intellectual disabilities after their parents had passed away remains a major concern amongst the parents.

An informal survey was done on parents to find out their knowledge of residential services available in Singapore for their children with intellectual disabilities. Survey was also done on some teachers to find out their awareness of the various residential arrangements in Singapore. Although I had been working in special education for many years, it was only when I joined TOUCH Community

Services that I got to know Touch Ubi Hostel (TUH). I had heard about residential homes for people with intellectually disabilities, but never heard of TUH. I had this strange feeling that not many people, whether parents or special educators, have known about this hostel and her programme.

Below are samples of questions for the parents and special education teachers:

3. Questions for Parents:

- 1) Have you thought about who will take care of your child when you pass away?
Please Circle your answer.

Please Circle your answer Yes/No

If Yes , who?

- 2) Do you think your other children or relatives will take care of your child with intellectual disabilities when you pass away? *Please Circle your answer.*

Please Circle your answer Yes/No

- 3) Do you know of any place/organizations that you can entrust your child when you pass away?

Please Circle your answer Yes/No

If 'Yes', where?

- 4) Have you heard of Touch Ubi Hostel?

Please Circle your answer Yes/No

If 'Yes', how do you know of Touch Ubi Hostel?

- 5) Do you know what kind of programme Touch Ubi Hostel offer?

Please Circle your answer Yes/ No

If 'Yes', please write down what you know below?

4. Questions for Teachers:

1) How long have you been working in special education?

2) What are the residential arrangement available for people with intellectual disabilities in Singapore. List as many as you know.

3) Have you heard of Touch Ubi Hostel?

Please Circle your answer Yes/No

If 'Yes', how do you know of Touch Ubi Hostel?

4) Do you know what kind of programme Touch Ubi Hostel offer?

Please Circle your answer Yes/No

If 'Yes', please write down what you know below?

5. *Some Findings*

Among the parents whom I had chatted with, most had wished to outlive their children with intellectual disabilities. Most parents have doubts if their children can survive independently. Some also have doubts if their siblings or relatives would look after them.

When asked about the arrangement for their children when they passed away, some parents could not think of any plan. They simply hope that they would outlive their children with intellectual disabilities. Others plan to place their children in residential homes. Yet, some others know that the siblings or close relative will take care of the person with intellectual disabilities.

When asked about the residential services available in Singapore for people with intellectual disabilities, most parents I had chat with, have no idea. Those who have answers would mostly list the various Homes for people with intellectual disabilities or old folks homes.

The awareness of the available residential arrangements are higher amongst special education teachers, when compare to the parents. A few special education teachers have heard about TUH, mainly those staying around east area. However, more special education teachers are aware of Homes as compared to TUH. The informal survey is meant to give a general picture of the basic awareness of the types of residential arrangements available in Singapore, amongst parents and special education teachers. Because the sample taken is small, further investigation has to be carried out to find out the overall picture.

6. Implications

It seems, however, through the mini- survey exercise that: in Singapore (besides staying with their relatives), staying in residential homes seems to be a common or rather, the few available options for people with intellectual disabilities after their parents had passed away.

Currently there are a number of homes catering for people with intellectual disabilities in Singapore. E.g. Bishan Home for the Intellectually-Disabled, METTA Home, Movement for the Intellectually Disabled of Singapore (MINDS)- Tampines Home. However, residential homes, being institutions, have their short falls. 'In these highly restrictive environment, the people with intellectual disabilities will be robbed of relationship with family and community and of the chance to learn skills they would have otherwise learnt by being in the community.'(Lim,L. & Nomanbhoy, 1998)

In Homes, though the basic needs of the residents are provided, there is no proper program to train people with intellectual disabilities on appropriate life skills to help them lead more independent lives. Most of the time, they are seldom empowered to make choices regarding food, hobbies, going out, types of clothing...etc. Most of the time, decisions are made for them. Interaction or contact with the community is minimal. As a result, they become unmotivated individuals and are very dependent on staff to do things for them.

I had decided to share what I had seen in Touch Ubi Hostel. In doing so, I wish to offer an alternative residential arrangement (besides residential homes), for people with intellectual disabilities.

7. Touch Ubi Hostel ... the hostel within a flat

7.1. Background

Touch Ubi Hostel(TUH) was started by National Council of Social Services(NCSS) in 1998 as a pilot project. It was named Ubi Hostel then. It was the first hostel specially catered for people with disabilities(physical and intellectual) , and was fully funded by NCSS and MCDS(Ministry of Community Development and Sports).The concept of the hostel was to provide a home-like, community setting that is different from the traditional institution-like facilities such as the residential homes. The purpose was to train people with disabilities to live independently and integrate back to the community. Proximity to community facilities and people were important considerations, so as to facilitate interaction with the community. As such, block 301 at Ubi Avenue, was chosen. Two stories of a 4 storey HDB flat, comprising of 6 units, were set aside for the residents staying at the hostel. The other two stories were occupied by the Ubi residents. The project was deemed as a success and the hostel becomes a permanent feature of block 301.

In 1992, the hostel was taken over by Touch Community Services and renamed as Touch Ubi Hostel. Recognizing the diverse needs of people with physical disabilities and those of people with intellectual disabilities, the hostel decided to focus their services on people with intellectual disabilities. However, during my service with Touch Community Service (TCS), TUH welcomed their ex-clients (people with physical disabilities) to visit her at any time. Many wheel-chair bounded clients would join her recreation activities e.g. social dance (dance on wheel chair), outings, parties, although they do not stay in the hostel.

The hostel has a capacity of around 30 clients. It can accommodate both male and female clients, who are housed at separate living units. The hostel accepts clients of all religion and races who are aged 16 years and above. When I was serving under TCS, the programs of TUH was staffed by a Director, a supervisor, 3 house parents, a training officer, an administration officer (who is wheel chair-bound), a social worker, a Job Coach and a driver. The hostel had about 60 volunteers who actively helped in various programs at the hostel.

7.2. What's Unique?

Biklen (1979) expressed the opinion that all persons are entitled to live in the community in the least restrictive setting. TUH provides a natural/ unrestrictive environment where adults with intellectual disabilities get to experience living on their own or with a flat-mate in a real HDB environment. The hostel is set up within the housing area, in line with the objective of normalization .

TUH prepares people with intellectual disabilities for independent living in the community and for open employment. Upon completion, her clients are given an option to either rent or purchases a HDB flat on their own, to continue to live independently with minimal support. This setting provides opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to- go to the neighborhood coffee shops, shop at mini-mart and use other common facilities.

7.3. Sample of Daily Activities

During the day, the clients would either go to the sheltered workshop in Society for the Physically Disabled, MINDS workshop or jobs in the open employment. Some are also employed by the hostel for her in-house projects such as thrift shop.

In the evenings, they would return to the hostel for their meals, after which they would go for recreational or enrichment activities organized by the hostel. The activities are varied, including aerobics, line dancing, language, mathematics, social skills lessons and outing to cinemas. Volunteers come in faithfully to run all these activities together with staffs to enrich the client's lives.

The clients are happy. While I was interacting with them, they told me that they get to meet lots of people and make new friends in and outside the hostel at coffee shops, park and the neighborhood. When they are down and depressed there are people (mainly staffs and volunteers) to give them a listening ear and counsel them accordingly.

The clients will go out to purchase their own meals in the evening, at the nearby coffee shops, making on their choices and at the same time mingle with the Ubi community. Sometimes, they would stay in the center and have meals with their fellow hostel friends just like a family unit. Their birthdays are celebrated every month as a family and their parents and volunteers are also invited to come celebrate with them. Within the year there are other events such as annual camps, BBQs, Christmas parties and concerts organized.

Families of people with intellectual disabilities in Singapore, are often subjected to high level of stress in coping with their disabilities and properly allocating time to nurture or train them in life skills. TUH assists these families by

temporarily taking on the responsibility to train and care for the clients, with the intention to integrate them back to their families. On Friday evenings, all the clients will book out to go home, and stay with their families. Others who do not have immediate families go to the TUH group homes and stay with their friends. On Sunday evenings, they return back to hostel to prepare for Monday- their working day.

7.4. Job Opportunities



Beside trainings in home management skills, TUH also provides job placement for her clients in the open market and equip them with the necessary skills, so that they can look for jobs in the open market. Their staffs help the clients to locate the most suitable job according to their interest, needs and skills. The job training component proves to be an important advantage. Employers who are initially hesitant of hiring a person with intellectual disability full time, is assured to know that a trainer or job coach will accompany them to the job site to assist in the initial training and adjustment of the client.

7.5. Integrating back to the families and communities

Touch Ubi Hostel gives a perfect place for families to place their child for training within a community setting to become a responsible adult, holding a job and able to live as far as possible an independent life or an interdependent life. After 3-5 years of training, the clients will return to their respective families to continue their normal life.

Families are greatly blessed to see transformation in their child's life. The child had become more confident and independent, able to take care of himself with less supervision.

7.6. Group Homes

For others, TUH staffs will rent from HDB a 3 room flat under Touch Community Group Home- an extension of Touch Ubi Hostel.

At a minimum monthly rental of \$150-\$200, the staffs get a HDB rental unit and help the clients to progress to community living with a group of friends, in other neighborhood. The units are furnished with basic necessities like beds, sofas, T.V. ...etc. Two to four clients will stay in a 3-bedroom flat at the HDB rental flats. Males and females will stay in separate units. Staffs from TUH will conduct regular home visitations to follow-up their welfare, needs and concerns.

When I spoke with the clients who graduated to Group Homes, they said that they are very happy to be able to work and stay in HDB house with their friends.(some of these clients have no caregiver or have caregivers who are unable to take care of them). These clients also drop by TUH daily to join their friends, volunteers for dinner at the hostel or coffee shop. After dinner, they will join the

programs organized by the staff, volunteers at the hostel. This provides for a higher quality of life; as compared to those who are institutionalized in old folks homes or residential homes, where walls separate the residents from the outside world. The lives of those in institutions are often very restrictive, boring or unfruitful. The residents hardly have chance to see and enjoy the beauty of outside world.

7.7. Owning a flat :The Story of Roy

This is a true story of a handsome, mature and talented cook called Roy.

Roy is a person with mild intellectual disabilities, now in his forties. He is a great cook! His meals are always enjoyed by his friends and TUH staffs. He is currently employed as a cleaner with Ever Shine. This is a life transformed from a street man with no future to a young responsible adult. Through TUH's community living, he has found a new life. Through the love, care, training, support given by the staffs, volunteers, friends in the hostel, he is now a proud owner of a 3-room HDB flat at Ubi. He even rented out a room to a tenant to help top up his own income. Today, he still goes back to visit the hostel regularly. The hostel now regards him as a volunteer and warmly welcomes him. Each time I remember him, my heart is greatly encouraged.

8. After Thoughts

I had never thought that people with intellectual disabilities in Singapore could own their own flat or live without their parents. In TUH, I see that it is possible. Even though some may not be totally independent, they can be inter-dependent, tapping on one another's strengths.

Although TUH has her limitation, being only to serve those with mild and moderate intellectual disabilities, I was much impressed by her vision and believes. I am glad to see the trainees living in a real flat, sharing a unit with their own friends. The house parents stay at their own units within the same flat and are within reach when help is needed.

Hostel living is a step forward for people with intellectual disabilities who work for self-determination, equal opportunities and self-respect. However, while advocating for independence and empowerment in their living, it does not mean that people with intellectual disabilities want to do everything by themselves and do not need anybody. It is not the programmes, but the ideology of normalization by setting the hostel within a flat, and the empowerment she gives to her clients; that makes Touch Ubi Hostel so unique.

It would be good to have more of these hostels planted in other housing estate in Singapore; so that more people with intellectual disabilities can benefit from the unique training environment and residential arrangements. I also wish that more people can know about her model and pursue the possibilities of our special friends living in a flat independently or inter-dependently(when they have no relatives to take care of them).

Lately, MINDS has plans to replace her current 2 homes for people with intellectual disabilities with a new centre.(Refer Appendix III, for newspaper cutting) The adult residents with less severe disabilities will be taught to do their own laundry, cook,..., so that they can live in a small groups outside the centre. I am excited to see the adoption of TUH 's vision by MINDS. I am not sure if the hostel will be situated in a HDB environment, where the hostel residents can freely interact with the estate residents. However, I believe MINDS could still learn from TUH model, find out her challenges, success and failures, and work together for providing a better future for our people with intellectual disabilities in Singapore.

I am compelled to share Touch Ubi Hostel- the forerunner, and document the stories of her clients/trainees who have successfully integrated into the community. Often times, we do have good examples. We are not aware of them due to the lack of

sharing among the service providers for the special people. I saw the importance of documenting and compiling the good models (such as that of TUH) and the success stories of people with intellectual disabilities in Singapore. It would be exciting to see our local success stories used for professional sharing and trainings at the Special Education Department in NIE. I believe this will encourage the parents and our fellow special educators that all things are possible!

9. *Researching the Identified Issue*

9.1. *Introduction*

In this component, I will put TUH's residential model in the light of normalization, deinstitutional era and community- member era, to help readers have a better appreciation of TUH. I will also present a case study of L'Arch community- a very successful residential movement for people with intellectual disabilities, that has been spreading world wide. In studying the success and ideology of L'Arch, I hope to learn how they have been able to spread and multiply so rapidly across the different countries. I also wish to be able to learn from their model and improve on what we have here in Singapore.

9.2. *TUH in the light of normalization, deinstitutional era and community-member era*

The fundamental principles of TUH are derived from two interrelated perspectives: (1) Independent Living Movement, and (2) Normalization Principle, according to the philosophical perspective of Touch S.Com-Services for Special People (<http://www.nyc.gov.sg/user/downloads/releases/2001/070901.pdf>). Under Independent Living Movement, Touch S.Com defines independence as in the (a) independent control of one's life, and (b) the right to decision making. The Normalization Principle adopted by Touch S. Com is as follow: (a) the normalization of the environment in which the person with disabilities lives in, (b) the enhancement of the role he/she can play in society, (c) it focuses not on the normalization of the behaviour of the person with disabilities, and (d) integration within the community is preferred over separation or a sheltered/segregated setting.

Biklen (1979) expressed the opinion that as a fundamental human right, all persons are entitled to live in the community in the least restrictive setting. TUH is born under this opinion and the normalization movement.

Nirje(1977), in a poetic form, relates the essential ingredients of normalization as:

“Normalization means... having a range of choices, wishes, and desires respected and considered... .. Adults have the freedom to decide where they would like to live, what kind of job they would like to have,... Whether they would prefer to go bowling with a group, instead of staying home to watch TV... .. Normalization means ... living in normal housing in a normal neighbourhood, not in a large facility with 20, 50, 100 other people because you are retarded... .. Normal locations and normal size homes will give residents better opportunities for successful integration with their communities.”

This is the kind of life style TUH offers to her residents. TUH is set in the normal housing- HDB, in a normal neighbourhood-Ubi housing estate to facilitate better opportunities, for adults with intellectual disabilities, for successful integration with their communities.

Szivos (1991) emphasizes the importance of social interaction if society is genuinely moving away from the segregated institution model for people with intellectual disabilities. She defines social integration as having two main components: relationships with others and the use of community resources. Paul Bramston(2002), in his paper on “Community Perspectives and Subjective Quality of Life” also advocate for the use of community facilities to promote sense of belonging, of people with intellectual disabilities, within the community. With community facilities e.g. coffee shops, Barber shop, clinic, mini-mart, sports hall, bus-stop,

park.....just around the hostel, the clients are given ample opportunities to use these facilities and interact with the Ubi residents. The advantages of TUH geographical location has enable the clients not only to have easy access to these facilities, but also increase social interaction, and sense of belonging in the Ubi community.

As compared to residential homes and hostels in tailor- made buildings, TUH provides a natural residential setting and a higher quality of life.

Lim L. & Nomanbhoy D(1998) in their academic paper “ Are we visionary in our service planning?” summaries the characteristics of service providers under the three eras, namely, Institutional era, Deinstitutional era, and Community- membership era, in a table. I had put TUH under examination using the table below:

Focal Questions	Institutional Era IE	Deinstitutional Era DE	Community Membership Era CME
Who is the person of concern?	The patient	The client	The citizen
What is the typical setting?	An institution	A group home, workshop, special school, or classroom	A person's home, local business, the neighbourhood school
How are the services organized?	In facilities	In a continuum of options	Through a unique array of supports tailored to the individual
What is the model?	Custodial/Medical	Developmental/ Behavioural	Individual support
What are the services?	Care	Programmes	Supports
How are the services planned?	Through a plan of care	Through an individualized habilitation plan	Through a person-centred plan
Who controls the planning decision?	A professional(usually an MD)	An inter-disciplinary team	The individual and family members
What is the planning context?	Standards of professional practice	Team consensus ?	A circle of support ?
What has the highest priority?	Basic needs	Skill development, behaviour management	Self-determination and relationships
What is the objective?	Control or cure	To change behaviour	To change the environment and attitudes

The hostel fall in-between the model of deinstitutional era(DE) and community-member era(CME). The readiness of the clients (DE) are still an important criteria for enrolment to the hostel and graduating to group homes or own flat. The focus is on programme(DE) fro the hostel residents and support(CME) for the group homes. All inter-disciplinary team, family and the individual client are involved in making decision pertaining jobs and residential preferences. Her priorities are both on skill development(DE)- e.g. home management, budgeting...job trainings , but also self-determination and relationships(CME). The clients are also viewed as a fellow citizen of the country. Her objective is to change the environment and attitudes (CME).

The hostel aim of promoting membership through uses of common facilities, and quality of life is in line with the philosophy of CME. The type of setting in TUH is identical to that of a person's home-HDB flat, rather than a hostel in itself. It is this unique natural setting that sets TUH so different from other residential arrangements. However, the provision of such a residential setting can only be possible with government support and permission.

9.3. Case Study of L'Arche

L'Arche was found in France in 1964. It all started when Jean Vanier(the founder) invited two men- Raphael Simi and Phillippe Seux(from a large institution near Paris) to make a home with him. With the help from friends in the church and state, then more people from different denomination and different countries, one house turned into several, and a community L'Arche (French for The Ark) was born.

Since then, it has spread rapidly throughout the world. Today, there are 130 L'Arche communities in various countries.

L'Arche uniqueness lies in her philosophy and ideology-that people with intellectual disabilities too, have something to contribute to the community, by just being themselves. Perhaps, it's most distinctive difference from other service providers, is that it does not seek to change or modify persons with intellectual disabilities. The relationships with people with intellectual disabilities in L'Arche are based on friendships and affection rather than professionalism. Each individual is valued as who they are and how they relate to others.

The residents can stay as long as they wish in the community, even after attaining the skills for independent living. Independent living is not the ultimate goal but the sheer enjoyment of living together. There is a strong sense of security among the residents as they know they can stay there as long as they wish.

There is a strong sense of identity and mission in L'Arche. Jean Vanier, in an interview at the International General Assembly of L'Arche, in May 2002, said: "The whole mystery of L'Arche is the belief, given to us,....., that people with disabilities are important... we are yearning to live and to bring to the world the message of the love of Jesus." I believe it is this strong sense of purpose and mission that has brought L'Arche so far and fast spreading.

9.4. Implications for TUH and other service providers

TUH and many service providers in Singapore, are in many ways very different from L'Arche . There is a strong sense of clients versus professionals due to the emphasis on training towards independence. I TUH, clients will graduate from the hostel once they are seen ready, at the end of 3 years or more (those who have not acquire the necessary skills or have no families can request to stay on longer).

TUH , however, is similar with L'Arche in the emphasis on continual relationships. The clients who have graduated to group homes or back to their families often visit and participate in the recreation and enrichment activities of the hostel. Others will drop by to say " Hello". There is a strong bond among the graduated clients with the remaining clients and staffs. TUH is like a second home to the clients. The clients have established strong bonds among themselves and with the staffs as a result of living and doing things together.

10. Conclusion

We have a lot to learn from L'Arche- their appreciation of people with intellectual disabilities, and their emphasis on friendships with these individuals. I am most impressed by it's strong sense of mission. To me, that is the secret to it's success.

There in not yet a L'Arche community in Singapore. The mind-set of the Singaporeans towards people with intellectual disabilities-what they can do, what they deserves, is still quite far behind other countries. Here, TUH seems to be more forward looking in terms of the goal towards normalization and community-membership. TUH still has rooms for improvement. But her unique residential arrangement is still worth sharing, especially to the local parents and other special educators.

11. References

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