

PEOPLE'S NEWSROOM

CREATING A MORE ACCESSIBLE WORLD

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Why we should educate people about disability to create a more accessible world

After recently watching Star Wars, I noticed how the films have quite a few disabled characters. For example, Chewbacca is non-verbal to humans yet still communicates and forms strong bonds. Yoda uses a walking stick but is still able to fight. As Ada Hoffman, the author of the space opera novels “The Outside” and “The Fallen, says in her blog “Darth Vader is cool – and Darth Vader is severely disabled. He’s a quadruple amputee and burn survivor.” Although more representation is needed, there are so many diverse species in Star Wars and they are treated differently based on their morals, not their appearance. In Star Wars, characters with disabilities aren’t treated any differently and often face adversity even in “a galaxy, far, far away”.

Imagine if in the future, disabilities were openly talked about and acknowledged, with disabled representation now commonplace. What if there were more education about disabilities, ableism and how you can actively support the disabled community instead of simply asking “What’s wrong with you?”

I know first-hand what it’s like to deal with ableism and prejudice. I’m used to being stared at and even have been followed on the street. I have TAR syndrome, which is a rare condition characterised by low levels of platelets in the blood and an absence of the radius bones in the forearms, meaning my arms are noticeably short. My own experiences with ableism inspired me to star in and produce my own documentary called “Speak Don’t Stare”. I made it to encourage others to ask questions about disability, rather than only staring, as well as exploring how others perceive disability and how these reactions can impact everyday life.

By 2054, I want to see disability history and education being taught to all ages. This would help develop an understanding of what it’s like to not be able to shower without help, to stand up without fainting, or the multitude of issues that comes with simply having a disability, which those without disabilities may never have considered before.

“imagine being on a train and not being able to leave because there’s no ramp”

A new programme in Germany gave nursing students a first-hand experience of facing accessibility barriers, through the use of specialised goggles and role-playing. The exercise was part of a four-hour training session called SENSE, which used a fake supermarket to show how everyday tasks like shopping can be very challenging for someone with a disability. Since 2016, SENSE has trained 3,200 students who come from various professions that interact with the public. Patrick Dohmen, the founder and chairman of the European Competence Centre for Accessibility, designed the programme to create a better world for his stepson, who has cerebral palsy. After the training, one of the participants said: “It is one thing to hear about something and another to see and feel it by yourself.”

If we take the work that Patrick Dohman has done in Germany, could we use a similar method in Wales? Perhaps virtual reality could be used to simulate how someone with short arms would struggle to reach items or even put a coat on.

I spoke to Kat Watkins who works with schools in Wales to increase knowledge of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People. “The purpose of the project is to support practitioners and education settings to meet their obligations in promoting the

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Disabled People (UNCRPD) to learners under the Curriculum for Wales. The project is funded by the Welsh Government and the material has been created co-productively from the lived experience of disabled people by a former disabled teacher. It is hoped that in the future, educating young people and learners about the UNCRPD will help Wales become less discriminatory, more accepting and ultimately forge an equal society.”

So why is disability education so important? A staggering two-thirds of the British public (67%) admit that they feel uncomfortable talking to disabled people, according to a 2014 Scope research. Two-thirds (66%) of those surveyed said that they would worry about speaking about disability in front of a disabled person, with many worrying about saying something inappropriate or using an offensive term by mistake. Many people said that getting to know someone disabled (33%), or getting advice from disabled people (28%), would make them feel more confident when meeting a disabled person.

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Bethany Handley, a Communications Officer at Diverse Cymru agreed, saying “We need to hear the voices and experiences of disabled people in the public sphere.” This would enable those without disabilities to get a better understanding of the everyday struggles those with disabilities have to face, such as not being able to reach the top shelf, having to rely on assistance when using public transport and not being able to use disabled toilets because they’ve been out of order for weeks. Imagine being on a train and not being able to leave because there’s no ramp. Disabled people have to constantly think ahead, all of the time. Is this cafe accessible? What medications or tools do I need to take with me if I’m going out all day?

One in three (30%) of disabled people in Wales face assumptions and judgements about their disability or what they can do and 1 in 3 (29%) of disabled people in Wales have experienced being rushed or people being impatient with them, according to a Scope survey in 2022. Disability Wales said: “In education we have people report to us that their child is bullied in school due to their impairment, often stemming from a lack of understanding from non- disabled students. They may feel a disabled student is being given an unfair advantage, such as extra time in exams. We believe by increasing conversations around disability in schools understanding will increase, leading to less negative experiences for disabled children.”

By educating all ages about disability rights and inclusion, I truly feel we can improve attitudes towards disabled people and create a more accessible world. With such fantastic advancements in technology, perhaps Wales could incorporate the work done in Germany to allow non-disabled members of society to empathise with people with disabilities, as well as listening to their stories and struggles. However, it is not a requirement that you have to share your story as a disabled person, and for those without disabilities, I urge you to do your own research using reputable sources. Disabled people are under scrutiny constantly, now more than ever. As Bethany Bale from Disability Rights UK said: “It’s everyone’s responsibility to remove those barriers so that we can all take part in society equally.”

Links

<https://www.ada-hoffmann.com/2019/07/28/disability-in-star-wars/#:~:text=His%20costume%20%E2%80%93%20the%20black%20mask,quadruple%20amputee%20and%20burn%20survivor>

<https://www.solutionsjournalism.org/stories/in-germany-how-to-teach-empathy-for-the-disabled>

<https://www.scope.org.uk/media/press-releases/brits-feel-uncomfortable-with-disabled-people/>

<https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/research-policy/attitudes-towards-disabled-people/>

<https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/social-model-of-disability/#:~:text=The%20social%20model%20of%20disability%20is%20a%20way%20of%20viewing,by%20their%20impairment%20or%20difference>

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