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A Story to Tell Advocacy with Playback Theatre

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A Story to Tell

Advocacy with Playback Theatre

By

Persons with Intellectual Differences

A Hong Kong Experience

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In the International Playback Theatre Network website, it is stated that “Since 1975, Playback has spread all over the world, and is now practiced in many different countries, languages and contexts.” Yes, Playback Theatre is practiced all over the world in many different contexts. In Hong Kong, a group of people with intellectual differences (intellectual disability as used by professionals, government, international organizations, like UN and forums and conferences) are not only Playbackers themselves, they also use Playback Theatre as a tool for advocacy.

The Founding of Chosen Power

Chosen Power (also known as People First Hong Kong) is a self-advocacy organization run by persons with intellectual differences. Parents, supporters and friends from the community who are not “labeled” as persons with intellectual disability (like us) can only join the organization as associate members. Though in Hong Kong and China, the term “mentally handicapped” and “persons with intellectual disability” are commonly used in the official documents, members of the Chosen Power prefer regarding themselves as persons with intellectual differences. Members want to be respected and appreciated as full human beings instead of the medical or professional label.

Throughout history, people who were different from the majority were marginalized. People with intellectual differences or other (dis)abilities were regarded as inferior and minority.

However, in the 60s in Sweden, People First Movement started with a group of individuals with intellectual disabilities founded their mutual help organizations with the help by the parents and the professionals. By the 70s, there were worldwide human rights movements for people with disabilities. In the 80s, individuals with intellectual disabilities launched the People First Movement in North America. And until 1993, members of Chosen Power launched this movement in Hong Kong. In 1995 Chosen Power founded their self-advocacy organization.

A Recap

A group of young people with intellectual differences met at a recreational center – the Island Gateway Club in 1987. They learned to play games together, learned to be a receptionist and how to chair meetings. They even organized a study tour to China and set up a social service group in 1989. There were many times they tried to apply for funding to attend overseas conferences but in vain. In 1992, they paid for themselves to attend the international conference – Independence '92 as organized by Disabled Persons International (DPI) in Canada. Inspired by what they saw, they set up a leadership self programming group and organized a seminar called “Our Work Lives” in 1993. They gathered their friends’ stories on work life and presented in a short drama. It was the first ever seminar organized by people with intellectual differences in Hong Kong. At the same time, they got financial support to attend the Third International People First Conference in Canada. After the conference, they set up an “Ad Hoc Committee” and were vigorously offering advocacy talks in universities, schools, rehabilitation centers, children and youth centers, and also to the parents and professionals.

On November 12, 1995, saw the inauguration of Chosen Power, the first self-advocacy organization for persons with intellectual differences is not only Hong Kong but also Asia. There are now a total of 100 members: 56 are regular voting members and 42 are associate members. They believe that they can speak for themselves; they can make their decisions; they want to have a community for all and they want everyone to respect for differences. They also want to cultivate an inclusive society. Their work includes advocate development; leadership training; community education; issues discussions; policy consultation and networking locally and internationally. The use of multi-arts media is very common for their self-learning and promoting their community advocacy movement. That is why members of Chosen Power have the chance to taste Playback.

Chosen Power and Playback Theatre

Playback Theatre was first introduced to Hong Kong by Veronica Needa in 1996. The Asian People's Theatre Festival Society (APTFS) and the Arts with the Disabled Association Hong Kong (ADAHK) have been a beacon for Playback Theatre in Hong Kong. In 1999, friends of Chosen Power first learned about Playback Theatre in an Artist-in-Residence program organized by ADAHK. They attended a series of workshops and presented some performances in theatre and also did touring in the community. Over the years, members of Chosen Power have attended many inclusive workshops (participants are of different abilities) organized by ADAHK. The trainers included Jonathan Fox, Robin Weir, Deborah Pearson, Veronica Needa, Mary Good, Hanna Fox, and many other international playbackers.

Traditionally, only those who were extremely "talented" and "verbal" would be selected to attend arts training classes in the special schools for persons with intellectual differences. However, theatre and arts have never been strangers to members of Chosen Power. In 1986 saw the first "Arts Festival for the Disabled" in Hong Kong and subsequently the founding of the Arts with the Disabled Association Hong Kong. ADAHK has, over the years, popularized different forms of arts to persons with different (dis)abilities. Thus, members of Chosen Power, being assessed as "IQ below average, many of them of unclear speech and hearing impairment" finally have the opportunity to attend different arts training workshops. They have learned Theatresports, Forum Theatre and Action Theatre. They dance. They sing. They paint. They sculpt. They take photos and shoot videos.

By 1990 they have done scripted theatre and puppetry. Some of them even have become a member of the all inclusive theatre company – the "QI Troupe" and doing stage performances annually since 1991. Since then arts have become a tool for them to have fun, express themselves, tell their stories, to train the volunteers in their leisure recreational social center – the Island

Gateway Club (social recreational club only for persons with intellectual differences). From 1993 onwards, after their first exposure to International People First Conference in Canada, a conference that mixed multi-arts as a means for sharing. The conference stage was a place for personal declarations, stories sharing and dialogue. Participants were using very diverse communication means to tell their struggles and enlightenment in life. Members of Chosen Power have been enlightened by this spectacular conference and People First Advocates. They are convinced that differences in cognition and language are no barriers to their rights and their involvement in community. They have a new perspective in appreciating their DISability:

DIVERSITY

IS

ABILITY

They realize that multi-arts approaches are very effective means for them to have diverse communication alternatives to the parents, the professionals and the community. The different art forms are effective and inclusive media for personal actualization and organizational advocacy.

In the past five years, Chosen Power has performed Playback Theatre for audiences with and without disability as well as with other fellow Playbackers. The performances have broken the barriers between people with and without disability. Members are no longer in need of welfare services. They are no longer the service recipients, being served and attended by the volunteers from community. Their stories are not only being told in clinical settings. Their performances on stage are no longer a means to prove their ability is compatible to the “normal” people. They are simply serving the community just like any Playbacker does.

Getting involved in Playback games, trainings and performances, members of Chosen Power have found a space to present their unique self. They have a space to serve the community. They have a space to present their diversity. They have a space to have their voices being heard. They have a space where their stories will be listened to and their feelings respected. They have a space where “normal” people are willing to share their feelings with them. They share the same status with the audience and everyone – a citizen in Hong Kong community; a community member embracing individuals’ stories.

Learning Playback is a real challenge to them. A member has enrolled in a “regular” training course before 1999. She had a hard time in catching up with the other participants. In that group, she was the minority and she was “differently able”. She tried very hard to accommodate and at the end she was able to make friends with other participants. But no one was inviting her for further gatherings and rehearsals.

In 1999 thanks to the ADAHK, the Playback Training Workshop has become a mixed group, 8 members from Chosen Power immediately grasped the golden opportunity and met another 6 participants from the community in the workshop. At the end of the workshop, 8 of the members and 3 other participants remained. The dropouts apologetically remarked that they preferred to have a workshop of their same level. But if they had time, they were willing to come back as volunteers to help the members of Chosen Power. Of course members were sad to see them leave. They missed those friends.

In 2002, a Playbacker had conducted a training workshop for a group of teenagers from a youth centre. He found that the teenagers were very passive and too self-conscious. He then invited members from Chosen Power to attend the training sessions. Amazingly the teenagers started to open up themselves and the group gradually lightened up. There was a saying among the youth

participants, “if they can do it, I CAN. If not, I will lose face!” Members of course enjoyed the sessions very much, they made new acquaintances.

How about members of Chosen Power? How do they describe their Playback experience?

Chosen’s Personal Sharing

“Playback is so great, I enjoy being on stage,” Kam To remarks.

“It has no script, no director, we can express ourselves freely. There isn’t any right or wrong,” Ah Ming’s brief.

“Introduce ourselves, I am the musician... we cooperate... Stories... We... together... fluid sculpture... pairs... chorus... Be our Best!” Tai Yiu explains.

“I was a member of the QI Troupe, I had to memorize every line and every movement. It was too difficult for me! It was so stressful that the director and I had to stayed up late to rehearse my movements and lines. Those horrible scenes haunted me until I take up improv training workshops. Playback sets me free!” Raymond exclaims.

“For scripted theatre, I have only a role to play and for many shows. On a Playback stage, I become many different persons having many life experiences... Sometimes I cannot make out what the audience is talking about, I will only do the part I understand. Of course I try my best and I really wish the teller is satisfied...” Big Brother Hong reflects.

“First time on a Playback stage, I was so frightened and did not even know where to stand and what to say. I am very confident after all these years,” Carman happily shares.

“Jennifer taught me Playback, I am a member of the Chosen Playback Team. We went to overseas conferences. To Macau, I was late, nearly could not get on the ferry” Chung Wing recalls.

“Playback to me is something like a radio phone-in program on stage. The Master of Ceremony is a different kind of MC. Being the conductor, one needs a heart to hear a friend’s story. One needs love to respect everyone’s experiences and sharing,” Vincent comments.

“I like being the conductor, I want to present gifts to everyone. But I still make lots of mistakes, it doesn’t matter, I will try to improve and my friends will support me,” Cheuk exclaims.

“Good to hear my mother telling her story – her ups and downs. I feel closer to her. What am I good at? I am a total failure in school and at home. But I am a star and find my dignity on a playback stage...”Man Ho says in tears.

“In Form 1, I have a very simple and light dictionary, having one, two, three and four... Now after serving the community, my dictionary gains weight and stores many stories...” Billy says proudly.

Multi-Arts Advocacy and Social Inclusion

Through the years of mix and match, members have also introduced Playback Theatre and other improvisational theatres such as Action Theatre, Forum Theatre, Theatresports to other rehabilitation organizations, like the sheltered workshops, day activity centers, vocational training centers, hostels, special schools and parents resources centers.

In 2002, with the Government’s funding support, members started the 2-year Peer Support Network for the fellow peers (studying in special schools or service users in rehabilitation organizations).

They develop their own facilitating sessions and have weekly preparation meetings. Friends from the rehabilitation centers enjoy doing different improve theatre games. For Playback forms, they like Fluid Sculpture, Pairs and Chorus very much. Most of them wanted to be the conductor and the musician. All of them are very proud of themselves when they can think of a thousand ways of introducing themselves. They finally have a place on stage regardless of their differences: The parents in the waiting area occasionally remark, “look! They are so creative! How come the professionals identified them as rigid, inattentive and lacking abstract thinking!”

Witnessing the glowing from the peer participants, members of Chosen Power then also invite the parents, volunteers and the staff to participate in their workshop sessions. No longer a support person nor taking a parent should be a bystander in the process, they shift to a learner’s role, while the members confidently coaching the ‘adults’ to relax and have fun. With no lines and scripts, the parents, the volunteers and staff are having a hard time to shed off their directive and dominating role. They are also finding themselves very uneasy in exploring and cultivating the rhythm of the group. Especially when they are not rendering help, they find it very difficult to ignite their playful spirit with the group. It really takes a while for the members of Chosen Power to crack down the carers’ and the professionals’ defenses. They have befriended with these fellow friends. They have shared what they have learned and encourage their peers to conduct gatherings in multi-arts approach.

The Advocacy Ambassador Project

With their success of the Peer Support Network, the Government again funds Chosen Power to launch another 2-year project: “Advocacy Ambassador Leadership Training Project”. It is a project for developing self-advocates in four stages. First is to be proud of yourself. Second is to know yourself. Third is to share your stories. The final one is to become an advocate/leader.

Multi-arts approach is still one of the key facilitation means. Participants will have the chance to try out different means of communicative alternatives.

In September 2004, members have the chance to work with friends living in mental hospital. The Day Training Centre, a unit of the mental hospital, is rehabilitating service users (patients) of both mentally illness and intellectual differences. The manager has proposed that she would like to have the service users develop a 15-30 min drama piece for the hospital's annual open day in two months' time. She also would prepare a script for the patient-participants so that members of Chosen Power have some directions to work on. Members have made a counter proposal to the manager: the script should be developed by the service users and the format of presentation should be decided by the users. After some internal staff debate and discussion, and the staff witnessing how members of Chosen Power using simple playback theatre forms the personal sharing and story building, Chosen Power and the users gain the full authority to produce the short performance. There have been more than 15 users, 5 staff from the mental hospital and 5 members of Chosen Power worked for only 40 hours for this project in six weeks. We can only make use of the Saturdays and Sundays to work on the project.

One can imagine that the rehearsals would be very chaotic. Since most of the users were on medication, it has been very difficult to gain their attention. To some users, they were very open to members of Chosen Power, but not everyone. Some have been doing nothing for more than a month. Some have also missed the sharing sessions because of their rehabilitation plan. So members of Chosen Power had to take note of the situation and could do nothing to every single one of the above uncertainties. The only one thing they have kept in mind was that they had to make their new friends feel good and look good. On the day of performance, the dream has come true. It has been a great success.

During the rehearsals and after the performance, the newly found self-advocates (SA) said the following:

SA A: “Finally the nurse and I have convinced my parents, I can do a public performance. I really don’t mind people looking. I just want to have fun.”

SA B: “I know nothing about acting. I don’t want any training. I cannot do it. I am only good at sleeping. Yes, I can certainly sleep on stage!”

SA C: “I want to be a model. I want to do Cat-Walk.”

SA D: “Well! I call finally sing Chinese Opera on stage.”

SA E: “Hi! Everybody, I am Can you tell me what is your dream?”

SA F: “It is best to stay in the hospital than going out, the world is getting too inhuman...”

SA G: “Even there is lots of uncertainty out there, I want to have my home and with my family members.”

Parent A: “Is he really my son?!”

Staff A: “This is truly an eye opening experience.”

Staff B: “They are looking so great...”

So the first group of Self-Advocates is born. What they have done is only the Playback self-introduction and at the end using 15 minutes inviting audience sharing their personal dreams!

And members of Chosen Power are friends to the new found advocates they will meet again.

Love at First Sight: the Ritual, the Repetition & the Rhythm

Members of Chosen Power are particularly akin to Playback Theatre not without a reason. They have done scripted theatre before. Like anyone participating traditional scripted theatre, they had to memorize every line and blocking and repeat the same shows after shows. That was a real challenge for them because the art form itself drilled on their weaknesses instead of strengths.

However, Playback Theatre calls for their natural talents of authentic and improvisational acting, without the necessity to recite long lines of scripted materials.

The ritual in Playback Theatre provides a safe environment for members of Chosen Power to let their creativity unleash. While the call for verbal communication and listening skills can be a challenge for Chosen Power members (as it can be for any Playbackers), learning the rituals for them has not been much of a difficulty. Mastering the rules and the forms provide them a safe space to create freely and to know what to do next.

Members of Chosen Power are born to love playback. So they say. They love the structure of the performing form. To them the performing forms are of a very **repetitive** frame guiding them doing improv. By doing improve, they can explore their own **rhythm** and the group newly emerging pace. The **ritual** is sometime they enjoy a lot. It is just like greeting people politely everyday and respecting the daily routine with grace. All these simple “routine” are easy for them to remember, to practice and to share. Just like David Wells, a improvisation artist and teacher, finds that there are **3 Rs, rhythm, repetition** and **ritual** to be very effective practices for working movement with children (Wishart, 2000). These three qualities empower the learning of the members and the self advocates. With this interesting structure, their creative self can be free and they can regain their self-confidence to explore and appreciate their unique qualities.

With the differences in their learning pace and cognition, their born spontaneity weaves with each story they hear in interesting ways. It helps them to reach the non-judgmental state easier than the majority of people who have more conscious minds. More interesting is the reflections they have shown on themselves after playing back others’ stories and they encounter experiences common to the majority of people but not to them, experiences they have been deprived of because of their intellectual differences, not necessarily from bad intentions, and quite the opposite that most of the

times were from the kind-hearted protection from their care givers. For example, once a story of breaking up was told. The Chosen Power member who was the teller actor indicated after the performance that he did not have any idea how breaking up felt because he had never fallen in love nor experienced a break up. All he knew was that he had to play it back for the teller the best he could, authentically.

The non-judgmental attitude works in both ways between the actors and the tellers/ audience too. How often would we find ourselves honestly sharing our feelings and stories with people with intellectual differences in the same way we do with our friends with the same “intellect”? “Aesthetics” could be an abstract and subjective concept but because of the very nature of Playback Theatre, actors are encouraged to use whatever skills they have to present the story. Members of Chosen Power may not form a physically magnificent sculpture. They may have created more than one focus on stage at a time in telling a story. Sometimes one can hardly catch their words. But their performances touch the audience in the most organically beautiful way when the voice of each teller is made heard by members of Chosen Power, who, by our culture and history, have been marginalized and silenced.

As a Playbacker and someone who works with persons with all kinds of abilities, I have asked myself would it be possible that I went into those psychiatric hospital wards to conduct this Advocacy Ambassador Project. The answer I have for myself is: I would not be as good. I would never expect the same kind of social interaction happening if I were the one stepping into the hospital ward.

Playback, other theatre or arts forms are in the every daily life of our human existence. As for the Disability Movement also has its paradigm shift in the past fifty years. From very superstitious myths to a medical model; from the social model to this new era inclusive movement, disability has

many faces and flairs. In the era of appreciating DIVERSITIES, we are looking for abilities instead of disabilities. A truly inclusive society is yet a dream to come true as long as there are still advocates for the “minority”. And this distinction between the “majority” and the “minority” will only end when we truly embrace diversity.

To members of Chosen Power, a Playback stage is a HOME for us to be friends and share. It is a LOVE for us to treasure and appreciate our existence. In this particular art form, they discover that there are love, appreciation and friendship. JUST BEING THERE no longer needs advocates.

Let us end our experience sharing by bringing out the Chosen Statement:

Chosen Statement

Don't call us retard, we only have different IQ

Don't give us special treatment, we only have different characteristics

Don't label us "disabled", we are differently able

Don't say that we are dumb, we have interests in something you miss

Don't treat us as a child because we have an innocent heart

Don't call us kiddo because we have names given by our parents

~~We are not abnormal. We are people ~~~

We can talk. Can you understand?

We can write. Do you comprehend?

We can read. Do you believe?

We can learn. Will you teach me?

We can work. Will you hire me?

We can play. Will you have fun with me?

We can vote. Do you know?

We can choose. Will you let me?

We can help? Will you let me?

~~We can enjoy life ~~~

We have feelings. Will you love me?

We have ideas. Will you value?

We have self-respect. Will you accept?

We have our dreams. Will you support?

We have our way of living ~

We are citizens in community as everyone of you

Show Respect because we are People First

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