

Symbols matter: Reengineering the disability outlook — Amar-Singh HSS

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MARCH 27 — Symbols and labels matter in everyday life. They determine how we look at and shape our opinion of an area/subject. Children and persons with disability often get labelled or typecast in symbols that are limiting and hinder their progress.

The common symbol we use to depict all children and persons with disability is the figure in a wheelchair. While only a small proportion of persons with disability have physical conditions, this has become the universal symbol for disability. This symbol of a person in a wheelchair, introduced in the 1960s, is known as the International Wheelchair Symbol or the International Symbol of Access (see Figure 1). While useful it conveys a passive outlook of the children or person with disability — passively sitting in the wheelchair while waiting for someone to help or push them with no abilities of their own.



Symbols matter in everyday life. We are influenced by them overtly or subtly. They influence our outlook and responses. Many people in Malaysia see disability in negative terms. A study by the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) Malaysia in 2017, on the knowledge, attitude and perceptions of the community towards childhood disability, showed that most view them as 'limited' or 'not normal'; and tend to describe them in terms of their limitations not abilities.

Internationally there are attempts to change our outlooks and symbols. Since 2010, Sara Hendren and Brian Glenney, co-founders of the Accessible Icon project, designed a new disability icon (see Figure 2), one which focuses more on the person and their ability (see: <http://accessibleicon.org/#use>). It is amazing what a small change can do to our outlook. This new icon supports the reality that many children and persons with disability, whether physical, visual, hearing, intellectual, etc, have abilities. They are not passive recipients of society's 'charity' but active participants, ones who have the same rights as all Malaysians.



In Malaysia we still have a long way to go from looking at the child's disability to looking at the child themselves and their abilities. In this respect, we are behind much of the developed and developing world.

Re-symbolising our nation is one step in the right direction. I appeal to media outlets, corporate bodies, shopping complexes, government agencies, etc to consider adopting this new symbol when we need to use a disability symbol. It would be ideal if our government mandated the use of this symbol as the default symbol for disability.

Note that Sara Hendren and Brian Glenney have put this image in the public domain, free for appropriation and use. Seeing this 'proactive' symbol will help to change the heart-set of the average Malaysian.

Children with disabilities don't need our pity, they need our support.

Children with disabilities don't need charity, they need their rights met.

Children with disabilities don't need to be viewed in limited ways, they need to be seen as children with abilities.