

Impact Summary

Disability Justice Change Lab

Where It Started

The change lab started out of a conversation that took place at the 2019 Regional Gathering when facilitation and some of the activities were so exclusive and ableist. People living with disabilities were among social justice people, and they still felt like they were not included. The activities were stopped, and the facilitators were made to listen to what disabled people were experiencing. Being engaged in doing, rather than just discussion, was fundamental to a solid beginning for this group, and working together further developed relationships. The group expanded through existing relationships across Righting Relations, ensuring trust and shared values amongst those who joined. In 2022, an invitation was shared across the RR West Hub and the National Network, and people felt called to be part of this. The group had conversations with folks who expressed interest as part of welcoming them into the circle. It felt organic, even if there was hesitation to open the circle initially.

How It Evolved

Early conversations did not include intersectionality, and without this important lens, there were tensions amongst some members of the circle. This culminated in a very difficult conversation during the delivery of the pilot workshop on Ableism in Adult Education, in which a participant was called to reconsider some comments that divided disabled people from other equity-deserving groups. Following this experience, the group recognized the importance of intersectionality and sought to ground themselves in that lens before moving forward with their outputs.

"After we really engaged in that conversation [about intersectionality], I felt welcome and that I belonged."

In a departure from what members of the Disability Justice Change Lab have experienced in other advocacy groups, in this team they described that there was no performativity or assumption that they are inclusive. Instead, the team worked together to learn together and build a shared understanding of what inclusion looks like. Members noted that there can be a lot of shame in spaces where people claim "they know it all." In the change lab, on the other hand, members felt comfortable "[being] my ignorant self, and ask honest questions." That attitude created an environment that supported the learning and understanding of other people's experiences and the nuances of the experiences with disabilities represented in the group. This approach of learning together and from each

other has made members comfortable, created close relationships, validated people's experiences, and cultivated friendly relationships among them.

"It can be rocky at times, but it feels good, it feels like I am among friends."

Impact

Impacts on the group

The most common statement among the group is that they feel seen, valued, and validated. Sharing experiences gave them perspective and made them feel supported. Members also shared a desire to widen the group's focus and invite the larger Righting Relations network to engage in the work with them. The conversations about intersectionality were fundamental for the group to widen their lenses and understanding, take conversations to a deeper level, and share their experiences with each other. This allowed members to bond on an interpersonal level and influenced their understanding of disability justice work elsewhere in their personal and professional lives. The team has analyzed policy to understand and demonstrate how empty policy stalls the inclusion of people living with disabilities and to contribute to national debates. This process was influenced deeply by the intersectionality conversations that they undertook together. Members now describe their work as rooted in a holistic approach.

"What I have to say is important and it is just as valid as anybody else has to say, and I am carrying it through my work and personal life."

Impacts on the network

This Change Lab has had a tremendous impact on the network, primarily on the ways that Righting Relations organizes its in-person and hybrid gatherings and events to be more inclusive, working with the Ableism team to better meet the needs of all people living with disabilities in terms of both facilitation and logistics. The 2019 and a similar 2023 regional gathering conversation about the lack of accessibility and inclusion opened up the capacity of Righting Relations members to see what others in the network are facing and look at inclusion in really practical ways.

"[We needed to] bring disability and intersectionality to the forefront and not as an afterthought."

These inclusive practices were then integrated into the preparation for the October 2023 National Gathering; team members described that it went from being uncomfortable to discuss the exclusion related to the regional gathering to having veto power over key logistics of the National Gathering. That allowed Change Lab members to give direction about what inclusion means and how it should be upheld throughout the organization

process, including the practices of asking all participants, regardless of whether they identified as having a disability, what they needed to participate fully and feel welcome.

Impact at a community/circle level

Members of the Change Lab shared that the adult education they do elsewhere in their personal and professional lives has been influenced and impacted by their experience in the Change Lab. The content included in their education and the approaches used to facilitate it differ. Members described including intersectionality in their community education work and rethinking the way that they hold conversations with colleagues and friends, noting that this change is directly connected to a greater awareness of the different experiences of disability and how it intersects with other aspects of a person or a community's identity.

Feeling validated within the Change Lab space increased members' confidence levels, which inspired them to initiate inclusion conversations in other settings. Previously, both within Righting Relations and externally, members described being used to adjusting their participation to whatever accommodations were offered by event organizers. As a result of their experience in this Change Lab, members expressed having the confidence and capacity to see that being safe and having access to spaces is a right and they "have found my voice to express that."

Out of the work and relationships built in the Change Lab, the group has delivered a series of presentations that they described as flowing easily because of the conversations they had and the confidence they gained in the Change Lab. Their experiences have also led members to support each other to participate more actively in the community. For example, one member was invited to present about the intersectionality of disabilities and their intersection with Mother Earth at a college in Alberta, and two other members put their names forward to support. The presentation was a success in part because of their strong relationships and increased confidence.

Learnings

Mainstream disability rights and disability justice movements have often been very white-centred, and there is a tendency to assert a hierarchy of oppression where disabled people are less recognized and less supported than other marginalized communities. When working to advance equity and inclusion for disabled people, it is crucial to start by establishing a shared intersectional lens as the foundation. Equally, in undertaking disability justice education in the community, disabled facilitators, specifically white disabled facilitators, must acknowledge their responsibility to challenge white supremacy, racism, transphobia, and homophobia in those spaces.

"Being part of this group has given me eyes that I didn't have before and enabled me to be ready to hear the answers to the questions I am asking."

One of Righting Relations' learnings from supporting this Change Lab has also been the importance of engaging directly with disabled people to ensure accessibility rather than assuming that something is "accessible enough." The lack of accountability in upholding federal and provincial accessibility standards means that asking whether a space or program is accessible is not an adequate indicator of its true accessibility. Venues listed as "fully accessible" would only admit to not having accessible showers, "one or two steps," or other barriers upon questioning and site visits. Disabled people are familiar with the many ways spaces and organizations take shortcuts when it comes to accessibility and can give clear guidance on what to ask and what to look for.

Where to Now?

The Ableism in Adult Education workshop and the Response to the Federal Disability Inclusion Action Plan were the two most significant outputs from this group, and both have led to sustainable partnerships and engagement. As a result of the work done in this Change Lab, members have been collaborating with the Alberta-based Action on Ableism group, a team of disabled artists and educators, to develop and deliver workshops on ableist language, inclusion in the workplace, and engagement with institutions like the Canadian Human Rights Commission, Portage College, and departments of Health Canada for AccessAbility Week 2024, and the hope is that these kinds of workshops can continue to be offered to institutions and decision-making groups going forward.