

MORE ROLES, MORE COMMUNITY LIFE

by Jane Sherwin

Jane Sherwin is one of two accredited teachers of SRV in Australia and New Zealand. She works as a consultant and her objective is to make social change through values based organisational improvement and transformation strategies, training, mentoring and supervision, evaluations and writing for various newsletters and journals..

This article is based on an article by Jane titled "Making the Most out of the NDIS" which appeared in Voice December 2013. The Journal of Down's Syndrome Australia



Most people would agree that being excluded to the margins of typical community life brings little reward to the individual and depletes our society.

This article draws on a theory called Social Role Valorisation (SRV) and illustrates that being in valued roles can be a path out of exclusion and into a community lifestyle that others without a disability take for granted.

SRV is a helpful thinking framework because its central idea is that if someone with a disability wants a lifestyle that is meaningful and brings participation and belonging in community life, then being in valued roles will be a crucial path to that lifestyle. This article also proposes a different view from those who believe that money, choice and a plan are the answers to all the problems related to disability.

Let's start at a place of possibility and explore how a better life is more likely if each person with a disability is supported to have valued roles.

VALUED ROLES STEM FROM OUR HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

All parents have dreams for their children before they are born. Each person typically has dreams about what they might like to do when they grow up, shaped by what they

see their brothers and sisters do and what they see in broader life. Often our dreams are played out in the many roles we take up in life e.g. employee, student, volunteer, team member, neighbor, friend etc. This is true for people with disabilities too, however, there are many dynamics that get in the way of these dreams becoming real life. Working for a better life, a life of richness and meaning, a life of purpose and a life that includes relationships with a range of people who aren't paid to be there is likely to be a richer, although more challenging path.

CONSCIOUS PLANNING FOR VALUED ROLES

In planning, the first step is to have a clear sense of what a positive future, outside of services and programs, might look like. This requires a focus first and foremost on the potential, the gifts and the talents of the individual, being mindful of needs but not focusing on deficits.

Three ideas from SRV which this article explores and to keep in mind are:

1. Think valued roles when thinking about a typical and fulfilling life.
2. Have roles in mind when naming your goals.
3. Plan to meet each role goal by identifying how the person can best learn the role and

become socialised into the role.

1. Think valued roles

The good things in life for an adult typically include things like having a home, having a job, continuing to learn, having friends and family, opportunities to contribute, having a spiritual life, receiving respect and dignity, health and control over the things that matter to them.

Being in valued roles makes it more likely that those good things of life are possible. At home, the roles could be that of homemaker, neighbour, a hobbyist of some sort and family member. At work, the roles could be an employee, a colleague, a tax payer and social club member.

Contribution and purpose could be through various

volunteer roles, or as an employee, parent or good neighbour. It is through roles that there is a sense of identity, status, respect from others and self-respect.

There are also age appropriate roles: for example a three-year-old might be in the role of the daughter, adored grandchild, cousin, and Wiggles lover. A twelve-year-old might be in the roles of son, brother, student, football player, guitar player, Ipad user and library member.

Also, if acceptance and belonging is important, then being in valued roles is an essential path because it is through valued roles that people participate in community life and become known. A sign of belonging is when the person is missed for their contributions or personal qualities.

Being in a role is very different from simply

having activities. For example, when a young person leaves school, there can be make-busy activities done to fill in time such as going on outings and doing life-skills training and

“Being in valued roles makes it more likely that those good things of life are possible.”

crafts at a day service. One problem is that in five years time the person might be stuck in those same activities with limited growth and opportunity. In contrast, for example, before a young person leaves school the question should be asked, ‘how does any other young person create a meaningful week once they leave school?’ That question gives rise to the roles of, for example, student, volunteer, employee, gym goer, library member, and

“Being in a role is very different from simply having activities.”

contributor to the home lifestyle such as through cooking a regular evening meal.

This means becoming clear about the vision for a positive future. It means identifying the sorts of roles that are likely to lead to an individual to have a good life. Any specific needs should be met within the context of pursuing valued roles and the good life. For example, the need to be skillful in personal care or to have manners should be met within the larger roles that those skills are necessary for, such as being an employee or tertiary student.

“Any specific needs should be met within the context of pursuing valued roles and the good life.”

If using support services, one might need to consider if the staff have the necessary skills and where-with-all to actually assist someone into valued roles. This is very different from someone being admitted to a group home

or expecting a service to find activities and outings to fill time.

2. Have roles in mind when naming goals

Potential roles of interest to the person are an important aspect of defining their goals rather than having goals simply for the sake of completing a plan. The sorts of goal areas include:

- building skills—for example, building coordination skills so that the person can be a soccer player
- developing a new role—for someone who loves to play the drums, the role could be drummer in the school band
- expanding or strengthening a current role—a person who has moved into their own home and is a neighbour could be encouraged to be a good neighbour through offering to bring in the mail or water the neighbour's plants
- moving out of negative roles—for example, if someone has learnt to act like the eternal child, they could move out of this negative role by learning age appropriate skills for a valued role.

The above illustrates how being in valued roles will be helpful in experiencing a rich and meaningful life.

include the people in the social environment, the activities that are done, and those things in the physical environment. All of those communicators convey messages about what the roles expects in terms of behaviour and responsibility.

The role of student is shaped by the presence of a teacher and other students. Being surrounded by desks and chairs also sends strong messages of where to sit and what to do. A fisherman, for example will be valued in the role if they actually spend time fishing, preferably with other fishing-lovers at a local fishing spot with all the appropriate fishing gear!

We also need to be alert that roles can be strengthened in terms of their role communicators and value. For example, in a real workplace there are more likely to be role communicators that convey high expectations of productivity and adult behavior. The role of employee is less valued at a sheltered workshop than at a real workplace where there are other employees who have valued status and are paid. In a real house sharing arrangement, there are role communicators that convey a message that this truly is the person's home. This is where a person is expected to look after themselves and the house, answer the front door and be thoughtful to housemates. The role of tenant is less valued in a group home than in a typical

“Role communicators include the people in the social environment, the activities that are done, and those things in the physical environment.”

3. Plan to meet each role goal by identifying how the person can best learn the role and become socialised into the role

The following examples show that socialisation into a role occurs through the role communicators. Role communicators

house with housemates who are there not on the basis of impairment.

When planning for a valued role, each of the role communicators becomes a decision point. Decisions about each of the following need to be made:

- Where is the most valued place likely to be? A cleaner in a respectable hotel, for example, has more status (and therefore more likely to bring more respect) than a cleaner of the local park toilets.
- What is the most valued grouping likely to be? If we think typical, then the most valued grouping for the role of student guitar player is with other students who are learning guitar on the basis of that interest, rather than being grouped because they happen to have a learning difficulty as well. One of the reasons that this is so important is because it is the other students who also become role models.
- What are the most valued activities likely to be? This decision point gets us to identify activities that are the tasks and the responsibilities of the role, for example, the role of tenant and homemaker would include paying the rent, cooking, shopping and cleaning.
- What appearance is consistent with the role? For example, a child care worker would wear neat casual clothing that allows them to bend, sit on the floor and lift children comfortably.
- What timing is consistent to the role? For example going to church would typically happen on a holy day at a real church, not at a time that is simply convenient for the minister to visit a facility

It is important to have all of these factors in place before or as early as possible when someone enters a new role.

If there isn't a fit between all of these decision points, then it is more likely that the person won't become socialised into the role and others may perceive them as incompetent and/or different to others who hold the same role. If all of these decision points are attended to well, then it is more likely that the person will learn the role in a way that is likely to lead

to others perceiving and treating them to be truly in that role and to the person learning the requirements of the role. This also means that the person is more likely to have a better chance at having a positive future as a contributing member of their community.

FINAL COMMENTS

If there is dismay and frustration at the experience of exclusion, if there is a desire to have an everyday typical life like others without impairments, then a helpful thinking framework is essential. Social Role Valorisation and its central idea of valued roles is a constructive and practical approach that has much to offer.

REFERENCES

- Osburn, J. (2006). An overview of social role valorisation theory. *The SRV Journal*, 1(1), 4–13.
- Sherwin, J. (2011). 'The desire for friendship comes quickly, friendship does not': An exploration of valued roles & relationships. *The SRV Journal*, 6(2), 22–31.

Contact Jane for further resources and information on workshops at sherwinconsulting@gmail.com