

Western Theory and Global South Practice:

Reflections from Rural Tamil Nadu

OT Frontiers, 23rd April 2022, Leo Helen Keller

My name is Leo and I'd like to talk to you today about the difference between the Western OT theory and assumptions I was taught in the UK and the reality of working with people who do not hold those Western perspectives, experiences or values.

I'll start by admitting that I've found this presentation challenging to put together. 6 months ago, when I agreed to do this, I was full of confidence and a desire to share my work. Right now, I feel like I have many questions and doubts and not many answers. But, I'm going to share these thoughts with you anyway in the hope that it will stimulate thinking and widen horizons and be useful for you in some way.

Some of what I will say is uncomfortable to talk about and to hear and could even be incorrect. If I did this presentation in another 6 months, it would probably be quite different. My understanding of how things work here is changing every day, so I apologise in advance for any disservice I may make towards the beautiful Tamil community I serve. I have great respect, admiration and love for my colleagues and students and wish to share challenges and differences only as a tool for learning, not with any judgement.

Just a couple of notes on the wording used:

By "Western" I'm mainly referring to the white middle-class able-bodied minority section of the global population where most of the mainstream OT literature and theory has come from. I am aware that many people from the West do not experience what I may categorise under Western habits or assumptions, but for the sake of simplicity that's the term I'll use. I will also talk quite a lot about Tamil culture, and I want to highlight that I am mainly referring to the culture that I am exposed to, which is rural, and largely lower class Tamil village life and is quite different from more Western and modernised Tamil city life. So, bare this in mind when I'm making general observations based on my current flawed understanding of very local culture.

So, let's begin.

I had an unusual upbringing living together with adults with special needs in a family setting, which gave me a lifelong desire to provide opportunities for people to live equitable and dignified lives. Not only did I grow up in a comfortable, secure, loving extended family environment, I also grew up as an able-bodied, middle-class, cis-, white millennial. The world was open to me. I had all the privilege, freedom and choice I could hope for with doors opening everywhere I went, and I took advantage of it. My OT training taught me that this was normal and that we all have choice over our occupations and engagement with the world. With this background, I came to work and live with people who have an entirely different experience of life.

The therapy centre where I work is a charitable organisation that was started 30 years ago by a German OT. Initially, it was a therapeutic playground under the tamarind trees for disabled kids from the local villages. At the time most of the kids that came had polio, hearing impairments or other

more physical conditions. Quite a few also attended mainstream school and just came for physical therapies.

Over the years, polio has been eradicated by a large vaccination drive, and we see increasing amounts of autism, neurological and behavioural challenges. There are also many children with genetic issues that are likely caused by parents being closely blood related. It is quite common for young women to marry their uncles (on their mother's side), so that the family wealth stays within the family.

Our centre is now a beautiful space with a range of different therapies and opportunities. It has a day care program which is 9-4 Monday-Friday for about 20 kids, plus 1:1 'in-reach' therapies for another 20 or so kids. The idea is that young children and babies come for intensive 1:1 therapies until they are able to engage and be within a group and then they slowly transition into the day care program where the kids are older, and quite a few are now adults.

It is still run by that German OT and now also a local Tamil nurse, and the team are all from the local villages. Most do not have official training other than perhaps a diploma in community-based rehabilitation or from short courses in various related subjects. We often have volunteers who come through with specific skills and they share what they know. So, over the years the team have been trained in various practices and have all found their preferred area of work where they specialise by taking extra courses and working with any professionals who come through.

There is a beautiful rich environment of love and care and trust where there is a strong focus on celebrations, social activities, being together and being happy. It's enriching and heart-warming. The other side of this very hands on and practical approach is that things like assessments, goal setting and session notes are very limited and poor quality. This leads to a lack of real direction or vision for the futures of the children. Some of the kids who joined 30 years ago are still with us now – our oldest is 37 years old. There are no services for adults with special needs locally, so it's tricky to plan for many of their futures. Some get jobs, but usually this is initiated by the student or their family themselves – there seems to be a resistance in our centre to let the students go. For example, we recently had a 19-year-old girl who had come to us at 16 because she wasn't managing at school. We spent 3 years teaching her vocational crafts and basic life skills and then her mother found her a job at as a craftsmen's assistant. There I was feeling great that the training we'd given her had led to successful employment, and the team were upset that she'd left us before they felt she was ready. They prefer to keep them safe and protected in a familiar environment and the outside world is not easy for someone with special needs so it's understandable, but of course it's very different from the productivity and independence focus that I'm used to from my Western education and practice.

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When I started working here, I was mainly doing fairly typical 1:1 OT with the younger children. But then, 5 months in, lockdown happened, and we had to close. Our centre doesn't do holidays (more than a few days here and there when it is burning hot in the summer or pouring with rain for days in the monsoon), so being closed is a big deal. Many of our students live in very tough conditions, in crumbling houses, some don't have walls, so the monsoon rains come inside the house preventing them from sleeping, some cook outside on open fires, a few don't have toilets. Most of our families don't have much money, so if they have one child with a disability and one without, the resources and investment goes on the child who has the most chance of being able to care for the family in future. This means many of our kids end up neglected. A few take a long time to eat, and the parents

don't have time to sit with them for an hour each meal, and so they don't get fed properly. Others are over 18 but still haven't learned to wash themselves or use the toilet independently because the parents haven't felt like they have time or energy to teach them. Many who have learned, have been taught by us.

During lockdown, despite our support with food parcels, three of our students ended up getting blood transfusions because their haemoglobin levels were dangerously low. Many of our students came back to us after lockdown sick, malnourished, with headlice, uncut nails, and had lost a lot of the progress that had been gained before lockdown. Many spent months sitting at home in a dark room watching TV with very little stimulation or attention from family who were busy at work or taking care of other siblings. Lockdown hit our children and their families hard.

Schools were closed for 2 full years due to Covid, but essential work was allowed to continue, and I had moved to a local organic farm, so I started a small project where some of the older students came to volunteer on the farm with me five mornings a week. We were reliant on parents doing the transport, which many couldn't do, so it started small, but almost 2 years on we have 15 or so students coming across 4 days now. I won't go into the therapeutic value of farming. You're all OTs and will understand it already, but I'll show you a short video of one of our student's progress over the first few months on the farm. [video features footage of a non-verbal autistic student learning to use a wheelbarrow where he goes from being totally unable to navigate it, to improving his spatial awareness, grip and balance to the extent that he can now navigate the wheelbarrow over ditches and in tight spots].

Rajesh* (*name changed) is a 19-year-old young man who lives at home with his mother. His younger sister is already married with a child and has moved out. His father struggled with alcohol addiction and ultimately lost his life to suicide a few years back. It seems he was also quite aggressive. Rajesh, who became the man of the house after his father died, understood that this new role involved pushing his mother around. His mother is a small woman who is frightened of her son who is bigger than her now. They were struggling at home and his mother was threatening to put him in some horrible institution because she wasn't coping. Rajesh started coming to the farm 5 mornings a week, using his strength to push wheelbarrows and make compost and his skills to contribute to his community. Each week he would bring some vegetables home from the farm to his family with great pride. He became more confident, self-assured and calm and his mother reports a big change at home. He is now fulfilling the role of man of the house in a much more constructive way.

Between lockdowns, there were periods of less restrictions where vocational training was allowed, so alongside the farm work, I started working in our vocational training centre, which is just a stand alone room part of our centre. Here, together with one or two colleagues, I was doing handicrafts, tailoring, macrame, woodwork and coconut shell crafts with the older students. Now we are fully open again, my main focus is still the farm work and vocational training, although I also do a group music class, and help with the admin and fundraising side. In all aspects of my work I face challenges as a Western OT working in rural Tamil Nadu, which I'd like to share a little of now.

The longer I'm here, the more I observe how different things are here to what I'm used to in the West. Tamil Nadu is a culturally rich State and the people who live here are very proud of their heritage. Tamil is one of the oldest languages in the world, and as the language has been passed through the generations, so have many customs and practices. It is a primarily Hindu State and there are many Hindu traditions that must be followed, which leads to a culture of strong cultural expectations and rules. Family and community are of utmost importance and a lot of day-to-day

energy is spent on maintaining social structures and status. Although this creates a touching, open and resilient network of interconnectedness where people genuinely look out for each other and help their neighbours, it also seems to lead to many people feeling stuck in a cycle of living a life they don't want to live, forced to perform practices they don't know why they're doing, forced to spend money on functions and clothes and vehicles and higher education that they can't afford so that their children can marry well, and so that their status is maintained or increased in their communities. I have had several conversations with colleagues and friends here who love Tamil culture and feel sad that many of the beautiful and intelligent practices and values of the region are being lost under a thick veneer of dogma and patriarchy introduced by colonisers. Most of the challenges that arise here are at that surface level and not rooted in the true rich heritage of the land.

Only 20 or 30 years ago, everyone was building with, and using, natural materials, so there was very little waste and life was in line with seasons and what nature had to offer, and also heavily focused on the basic every day jobs needed for survival. Farming was the primary occupation here for centuries, but it's a hard job in this very hot and humid climate so many are now training in tech, medicine, engineering etc and moving to the rapidly developing cities. Capitalism and consumerism has reached the villages too now, and with that, so has diabetes, obesity, unhealthy consumption and lifestyle habits and crippling debt. Alcoholism is high, suicide is high, unemployment is high. Wages remain very low, while cost of living increases at an alarming rate.

Tamil language is hard, and after 2 and a half years of trying to learn and being immersed in it, I still struggle to string a sentence together. What surprised me more though was how different the body language is. You are probably all familiar with the Indian head wobble. It can mean yes, no, perhaps, hello, goodbye, thank you, please, anything really.

In the West, what do you do when you ask a question? Raise your shoulders? Bring your palms face up? Tilt your head? Here you pump your fist, like you've just won a point in a tennis match. It took me a while to figure that one out, with lots of confusion on both sides.

I've also noticed that Tamil people have a tendency of not saying "no", as it is considered rude, so I still get caught out wondering why people have agreed to something but then don't do it or even create barriers to it happening. I've also seen a tendency to avoid conversations that might be conflictual or embarrassing, so there are a lot of things that are left unsaid. While Tamil is hard for me, English is also difficult for them, and my suspicion is that if they don't understand me there is a tendency to pretend they do.

The combination of different languages, different cultures, different contexts, priorities, values, body language and intonation, habits... means it takes a lot of extra energy and time for me to get to the bottom of things and understand what's actually going on. It can be exhausting. I moved here very aware of India's colonial past and my Western-centric assumptions and views, so in a real desire to avoid pushing my ingrained Western agenda, for most of my time here I've been trying to silently observe, learn as much as I can and adapt to life here. But I'm realising now that I will always be a foreigner and the best I can do is find the balance between understanding and respecting the culture, and on the other hand challenging practices that I consider damaging and oppressive. As I find that some practices unfortunately fall into that second category, often it's about pushing gently on a few doors and seeing which one I can get to swing open. I have to practice critical reflexivity on a daily basis and keep returning to my deeply held values of equity, integrity and compassion in order to try to figure out where it's ethical to push and where it's not. And also, to realise where I've simply misunderstood a situation.

At University, I was taught that occupations can be split into 3 categories: productivity, self-care and leisure. Let's explore those a bit.

Self-care.

Of course, people here need to do self-care just as much as in the West, but it is done differently. For example, many of our kids still feel more comfortable going to the toilet outside in the open. It is also considered unhygienic and impure to have a toilet inside your house or building, so many do not like it for that reason. Going to the toilet outside can be the easiest option in terms of skills required, as often there is no wiping or cleaning done afterwards. The challenge of this is meeting hygiene needs, especially for menstruating girls and women, and the safety risks of going out alone, often in the dark to protect modesty.

The second toilet option is a squat toilet with a bucket and plastic jug for cleaning. Most of our students are familiar with this, but it requires some multi-tasking and both hands (!) to squat, fill the water jug and then pour with one hand and clean with the other. It also requires you to be able to differentiate between left and right, especially as we eat with hands here. As rural Tamil Nadu becomes increasingly more Westernised, one of the skills we're having to teach here is how to adapt from using an Indian toilet to using a Western one, as well as moving away from buckets and jugs towards bum guns. These require different sets of skills and dexterity and many of our kids struggle with it. Although supporting people with toileting is comfortably within my OT experience of the West, it takes some time to learn how it is done here and figure out techniques for how to teach it. I'm still struggling with how to teach hygienic toileting to one of our young women with hemiplegia who can't use her right hand.

Washing happens with a bucket and jug, no baths, no showers. Again, a different set of skills and techniques. Washing is also expected to happen in the mornings. My colleague seemed almost disappointed in me when I supported one of our young women to wash in the evening before bed on a recent trip because she was sweaty and a little smelly; she couldn't understand why I wouldn't wait till morning. And then when it came to morning, I was instructed to help her wash again, despite the fact she was still fresh from last night's shower. I was also told off for supporting this same young woman to have that morning's wash before cleaning her teeth – apparently it's very important that teeth cleaning comes first. But they will all happily go to bed at night without cleaning their teeth and seemed confused when I insisted that they clean their teeth first. These examples once again raise the question for me of where the line is between respecting and adapting to cultural norms and advocating for the health of those I work with.

As accessible toilets, showers and general accessible infrastructure is rare here, we generally focus on skill building rather than adapting the environment. There have been a few occasions when adaptive equipment has been given to families, but due to the stigma it holds or a lack of understanding (despite our best attempts to educate families), we will often find that equipment in a rubbish dump, or sold, or given to another family member who's considered to have more need for it.

There are also a lot of rules about how to dress, particularly for women, from which dress tops you are allowed to wear leggings with to what shape your earrings should be, to how you wear your hair. The idea of personal choice and freedom of expression is limited more or less, to the colour you wear.

Leisure:

Leisure, as we categorise in our Western hierarchy of occupations, is very limited here, with the exception of a few examples like watching TV. Many families do not have toilets or even walls on their house, but they do have TVs and they are on virtually all the time. One other Western recognised form of leisure is cricket. Boys and men will often play cricket in the evenings or weekends where a bunch of families and neighbours play on some large field with lines drawn into the ground with sticks. For almost all of our students though, cricket is not an option for them as their disabilities prevent them from engaging in one way or another.

Leisure as it is expressed here, however, is not its own category and cannot be separated from engagement in community life. It is common, for example, for men to drink tea in little tea shops. They will often sit with other men and chat or read a newspaper in the morning before work. A few of our adult male students will simply wander around or sit on the side of the road with other men observing life. Some of our students even help out at different workshops, like a carpentry or motorbike repair workshop in their spare time, sometimes in return for samosas and tea. A big part of community life is also celebrating festivals and functions, and because celebrations like weddings and a baby's first birthday are community events, most people have many of these functions to attend.

My colleagues and students have mostly never taken a holiday in their lives. Any annual leave is spent on family obligations. Their experiences of mainstream Western leisure activities and holidays are entirely through what our centre offers. Women also often have their activities outside of the house limited or dictated by their fathers or husbands.

Leisure in the Western sense starts to exist as soon as income rises. In the cities it is common to find similar leisure activities to the West, but not in the villages. Even where these opportunities do exist, they are not taken advantage of as they are not part of the culture.

Productivity:

Productivity is a large part of life here as it is so essential in order to survive. But, once again, there are quite a few differences between what I know and what is practiced here.

For example, food has to be cooked in a certain way, in a certain combination, and served and eaten in a certain order and manner. You eat while sitting on the floor and eat with your hands. Often food is served on a banana leaf and is folded at the end to show that you have had enough, but if you fold it the wrong way it is a sign that you either didn't like the food, or you are at a funeral. It is almost impossible for me to do a cooking assessment, because there are such strict customs for how things are done and how things are cooked that until I know them all, I'm simply not able to assess where that person is at. I also can't easily help them to learn, because I don't know how to do it myself. Also, cooking is not considered a priority for our students because the mother cooks, or sometimes the mother-in-law. I haven't quite understood at what point the daughter goes from having never cooked in her life to being the best cook her husband could hope for, but our girls are generally not supported or encouraged to cook at home as it would not be proper for them to do so. The men need never learn to cook.

Some of the girls are encouraged to help with cleaning and general household tasks. Again, the boys and men are not. And here we also see a clear indication of how much the family wants to invest in the child. If they think their child will be able to get married, they will invest the time it takes to teach them to work at home. If not, they won't expect anything of their child, even if they have the capacity and perhaps even the desire to be helpful. Many of our kids are looked after like babies and not taught to do anything for themselves or for others. At our centre we teach them all to prepare food, to clean and to do general chores.

For able-bodied women, the situation is quite different. I asked one female colleague what her morning routine had been like that day. She explained that she had woken before it got light, washed the pots, cleaned the living space, swept the yard, made a rice powder decorative mandala outside the house called a kolam, prepared the tea, gone to the morning market where she can get the cheapest groceries, dropped off some of those groceries with her mother in the neighbouring village, dropped by her sister's house to make sure she was getting up, following her recently becoming a widow and having two small kids to care for, then she came back home and to get her own kids up while cooking breakfast for them and her husband and parents in law who all have different food requirements and expectations, and then they took the kids to school and were at work by 8:30. For some women without plumbing, water is collected from the village tap and cooking is done on a wood fire. At lunch, women are often expected to rush home to prepare food for their parents in law and kids, if they're home. After work, the household chores continue, alongside helping the kids with homework, helping the neighbour fix something in their house, and perhaps going to the puberty function of someone on your street's daughter. Sleeping is usually done on a straw mat on the floor. The weekends are spent travelling hours to relatives villages, or helping parents with their work, or visiting temples as mandated by Hindu practices. For my female colleagues, coming to work is often the relaxing time of the day.

Men, although exempt from much of the grind of day-to-day life, are often shouldering the pressures of much of the family: the financial pressures, the status, the standing within the community. He needs to make sure that he has contacts with the right people, is drinking tea in the right tea shops, is attending the right functions and giving the correct money or gift at those functions. He is the one who makes virtually all the decisions about the family and if he makes the wrong decision he faces potentially being shamed by his whole community and bringing shame on the family. Social standing is so important that often the man will end up taking out loans he can't afford to pay back in order to keep his social status in one area or another of his life. This pressure and stress often leads to alcoholism and suicide, as mentioned before.

For these reasons, both men and women often seek ease and comfort and financial stability in a job rather than meaning or purpose or enjoyment. Where I've been taught to support people to find the productive occupations that are most rewarding and exciting for them, here often the biggest wish is to find a secure and well-paid government job where you have to do as little as possible. I found myself cheering on a young man to bribe his way through a local Politian into a potentially unsuitable and boring government job rather than working with him to find a job he would actually be good at and enjoy.

Casteism also plays into productive occupations. I'm still very ignorant about this area, but casteism was originally a system of occupational division. The high caste Brahmins were teachers, philosophers and gurus. The low caste Dalits, also known as the Untouchables, were the sewage cleaners, road sweepers etc. Previously you were born into a caste and could never hope to escape it. Now casteism is abolished and more and more Dalit communities are sending their children to university, which is a luxury they often can't afford, but they hope it will pay them back in the end.

Although these rules around vocation are changing, there are still some deeply entrenched beliefs. For example, a cleaner who used to work with us was complaining that the wealthier university educated colleague was sweeping. At our centre we all help with everything, and once a month we do a thorough clean altogether. My colleague was cleaning just like everyone else, but because she was from a higher caste, the cleaner could not accept that she was demeaning herself to the level of the cleaner herself. She complained so much that in the end she was told she would have to either accept that here we are all equal, or she would have to leave. She handed in her resignation immediately. She would prefer to be unemployed than to work with a higher caste woman who is cleaning.

As I've just tried to express, one overriding assumption in Western OT theory is that all occupations are split into three categories: self-care, productivity and leisure. The reality here is that many occupations are engaged in for family, community and belonging. Getting married and having children is of prime importance, even if you have a disability that makes caring for others difficult, if not impossible. This has led to a few of our past students ending up in very unpleasant circumstances with children they can't care for and husbands and extended families that abuse and take advantage of them. Right now, we are having many conversations about one of our 16-year-old girls whose parents intend to get her married in a year or two. She does not have a visible disability, so her parents expect to be able to find her a husband, despite the fact that intellectually she has no real understanding of what that means. She is not able to take care of herself, never mind a husband or children. As a team who all agree that she should not be getting married (and by extension having children), and who don't want to support that in any way, should we spend the next two years teaching her as many of the skills we can to help her in the roles she will be forced into, or do we say that we provide vocational training only and if the family don't want that they can take her out of our centre? My preference would be the first option as I don't think we can change anything by taking a stand, but it's complex.

In the West we focus on individualism and independence. Here the priority, even necessity, is collectivism and interdependence. The strongest motivators of actions and occupational engagement are related to social capital. The individual is not the centre of his or her life, the social and cultural expectations are. The family and local society are arguably the people round the table deciding how a person should live their life, rather than the person themselves.

In the West we assume freedom of choice and occupational engagement. Here family and society dictates virtually every aspect of life.

Western neoliberal society is heavy on economic productivity and being busy, to the extent that you are considered lazy or apathetic if you are not stressed. Here the value structure places importance on being and belonging, and participating in community life, and paid work is often not the focus of the day.

In the West, there is a sense of entitlement and expectation of leisure time. Here, any time that is not spent at work, is spent caring for family and following the cultural and religious traditions of the community.

In the West, we champion evidence-based practice and thorough record keeping. Here there is a tendency to follow familiar and traditional local methods of practice and to accept them as good without analysis or evidence. This is perhaps one of the biggest things that I struggle with personally. In the UK I was taught to question and challenge, to think critically and that things are complex and there is rarely one right answer. I was taught to explore and push boundaries and invent and be

creative. Here, the education system and curriculum is still left over from the British Raj, when colonisers wanted Indian kids to learn how to follow rules, not question authority, to understand that there is a right and wrong way of doing everything and to stifle critical and creative thought. They wanted to train workers, labourers and soldiers, not thinkers, teachers or leaders. Unfortunately, even since Indian independence 75 years ago, not much has changed in the curriculum and the quality of education is poor. Children are taught to learn by rote, to never question the teacher or anyone superior to yourself, and to learn largely by memory rather than by thinking. For example, exams are a series of questions that are featured in the textbooks used by all schools. You do not need to understand what the question means or how to solve it, you just have to remember what the answer is to that question. This can be quite difficult for me, as it has led to the team making some decisions that I don't agree with because they want to stick to how things have always been done rather than thinking critically about what the students actually need, or making any proper plans or goals for them.

Part of the reason I left the UK healthcare system was because of the excessive documentation and fear-driven policies. I found it challenging that so much of my time was taken up by paperwork to protect mine, or the company's, back, and not being with my clients. It was a joy and relief to come here where paperwork is considered a waste of time and hands on practical work is championed. However, I quickly realised that SOME level of assessment, goal setting and record keeping is helpful, and it is a constant balancing act for me to see how to do this, how much I try to engage the team in doing it and where my energy is best spent. Right now, I feel like mine and our centre's documentation is inadequate and needs improvement, but the question is how do I do this effectively? How do I demonstrate to my hardworking colleagues busy in sessions and group activities who look at me blankly when I show them assessments, that sitting by myself with a pen and paper is useful for the kids? And that perhaps they may want to try it too? My colleagues already have busy and tiring lives, as I've expressed, they work hard, not because it's a well-paid job, but because they care. They struggle with spoken English, and written English is even harder, so forcing through change in the form of written documentation does not seem sensible. But how do I create a way to have more considered and future-focused work that does not rely on documentation or critical thinking? Another question in progress. Any advice welcome!

As you can see, there are large differences between the OT theories, models and templates that are designed, championed and tested by a small group of people in the minority Western world, and the reality of experiences, possibilities and values of the people I work with here in rural Tamil Nadu on a daily basis. The theories that I learned at University are awkward and ill-fitting for my work here. Interestingly, my dissertation at Uni was looking at the occupational choices of youth in disadvantaged communities in Western societies, and the findings very closely reflect what I see here in relation to occupational choice. For young people without comfortable access to money, resources and opportunities, the focus also seems to be much stronger on the social aspect, on social status and on being together, rather than on productive occupations and independence. The research also seemed to indicate a sense of community prescribed and controlled restrictions that led to a sense that choice did not exist, even where it did in a practical sense. I won't go into that research now, but the fact that class, wealth and social standing seems to have similar dissonance even in the UK indicates even more that the models that we have in OT are ineffective and exclusive, and we need to start creating new models together with our clients.

So, I've given you a long list of challenges, questions and doubts. But I also want to highlight where Western OT does overlap with reality here. And that is that people can learn and thrive through engaging in occupations, so long as they are appropriate. And that may be vastly different depending on who you work with. As I grapple with many of these challenges and figuring out what is appropriate, and where the balance is between advocating for my clients health, wellbeing and human rights, and where I should accept and respect the culture –and its restrictions -, I hope and believe that if I continue to work from a place of equity, compassion and integrity that I can bring some good to the lives of the children and young adults I support. I have much to learn and I expect it's a balancing act I will have to live with rather than find one right answer for. In the meantime, I keep asking questions, being curious, and quietly challenging norms where I can.

I will finish by sharing some feedback I received from a guy who's worked on the farm for about 40 years since he was a child coming with his parents. He told me, with tears in his eyes, that when our students first started coming to the farm he was nervous and unsure. He questioned what people with special needs were doing in a work environment. But he's observed how much they've learnt and how good it is for them, but also how much they've brought to the farm, in terms of practical help and positive energy. He was gushing with appreciation and was touched that they come voluntarily to help the farm with no expectations of receiving something in return. He said that the farm team now know how valuable our students are on the farm, but people outside don't and he wishes his knowledge could be shared.

I was very happy to hear this. While I try to provide the support needed for my students to live their best lives, I recognise that the realities they live in are not in their favour, and if a small ripple of social and cultural assumption change has been created, I feel like I have done something worthwhile.

I'll finish with another little video of the farm project, which has been one of my highlights of working here.

[video features 4 of our students in the first months of the farm project doing different farm activities like composting, weeding, pruning, mulching, harvesting].

So, that's it. Despite all the challenges, I love my work and am grateful for the opportunity to be part of life here.

Thank you for listening and I welcome any questions or feedback. Here are my contact details, feel free to contact me anytime. I hope you enjoyed it.

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