

The only way out is the way in.

I'm very pleased that we all are gathered here in Tbilisi for the 7th International Conference of ICEVI -Europe for members, as well as, non-members from East- European Countries. Welcome to you all.

May I introduce myself shortly; I'm Hans Welling. I'm coming from the Netherlands.

Till my retirement I was President of Royal Dutch Visio, a national organisation for the education and rehabilitation of people with visual impairment, inclusively people with multi-disabilities of all ages.

Before I became director of the Royal Institute for the Blind, I worked in an institute for people with intellectual disabilities. It was a total institution. All facilities were present on one compound; school, central kitchen, health centre, free time activities etc. It was really a total institution based on the philosophy that people with intellectual disabilities have to live in a safe environment.

In that time, all kinds of services for people with disabilities were not client-oriented but residence-oriented. It was true not only for them. Normal was the norm. A standard model thus for everyone in the society.

The institute for the blind, where I became director later on, consisted of a nice school and houses for groups of children.

For that time it was considered to be very modern. Each child had his own bedroom. The institute was located in a beautiful forest, but segregated from the surrounding community.

For the parents of the children with a visual impairment, it was in that time self-evident to bring their child to the boarding school, which is where the professionals were at. The parents themselves felt unable to educate their child. There was a kind of pre-care with the intention to prepare the child for the stay at the residential setting.

After my experiences in the residential setting for people with intellectual disabilities, many questions arose for me. Is this the place where children are being prepared for their life in society to live independently? Is this the place to become adult?

The students told me that they did not have friends at home and even their relationship with their parents, brothers and sisters had changed after so many years of living in an institute.

During the first international conference on youth with visual impairments, the youth made the same notable statements.

They stood for their right to live at home and to grow up with their brothers and sisters. They also gave their opinion about going to a regular school instead of a boarding school. They said they wish to join sighted peers at school but also outside school, in their leisure time. In actuality, they wished to live like everyone wants to live.

We all know that education is the gateway to full participation in the society.

Fortunately, the insights and views on education and society in general are totally changed.

Amongst other objectives, the Millennium Development Goals of the United Nations, 2015 speak about the following:

- To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- To reduce child mortality
- To achieve universal primary education

Etc.

However, the 17 new Sustainable Development Goals of the UN to transform our world talk about;

- Inclusive and equitable quality education and life-long learning
- Labour market inclusion
- Cities for all, thus, inclusive cities.

And many other goals, oriented to an inclusive society.

David Lopez, President of the Spanish Organisation, the ONCE describes inclusion in this manner:

“Inclusion is not the individual’s adaptation to a standard model of development, but the appropriate response of the society through the goods and services, that should be given to each individual according to their characteristics and needs.”

Inclusion is a big challenge for everyone worldwide and means partnership between service providers, organisations of disabled people, local and national governments and between parents and strong parents organisations and professionals and the international exchange of experiences in workshops, seminars and conferences such as this one.

There is now way back.

Almost all countries have ratified the convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, CRPD. So we speak about human rights. People with disabilities have the same rights as everybody but also have the rights for extra support.

What does this mean for the everyday reality? What does this mean for parents, professionals and policy makers?

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have given my speech the title: The only way out is the way in.

We can change our systems. The only way out is the way to our own inner being. That means we have to change our mindset. Everyone can be the actor of changes.

Some years ago there was an international conference about deaf-blindness in The Netherlands. In the plenary session, a woman took the microphone and told the audience that she came from Tanzania and has got a deafblind child. There was no service providing for deafblind children in Dar ES Salaam, the capital. She founded a centre for deafblind persons.

The parents association in Egypt, Epavi, promoted inclusion for their children with visual impairment in regular schools and support children and their teachers in the schools. Now, the association is an advisor of the Ministry of Education with relation to inclusion in regular schools.

The director of a comprehensive school in Lithuania opened the school for all children living near the school. It is a nice and creative school also for children with disabilities. There were not any special facilities.

In Ukraine, schools become centres for education and rehabilitation. In this conference, there is a presentation about this transformation process.

In the Netherlands, almost 80 % of the children with visual impairment go to mainstream school and live at home. There is a small group of children in the special school that are multidisabled or have behaviour problems, but most of them live at home.

In many countries, the schools have been transformed in acknowledge centres with an outreaching program. The service providing is not only for the children in the special schools but for children in mainstream schools as well.

Better yet said, the service providing is to children and teachers of mainstream schools but the centres have facilities as well in case children for a short or long time have benefit from staying in a residential setting.

In 2012, UNICEF released a report called “The Right of Children with Disabilities to Education; a right-based approach to inclusive education.”

I would like to quote a few sentences from this report.

“A recent view of inclusive education in the region found, for example, that Albania, Serbia, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine all mention the lack of financial guidelines and limited funds to regular schools as factor inhibiting implementation of inclusive education.

However the conclusion is that “The real problem often lies within the historical investment in separate, segregated systems of special schools, the lack of political will to make inclusive education available to all and the uncertainties of parents that inclusion will benefit their children.

This brings me more directly to the theme of this conference.

Partnership: Parent professional cooperation in the process of education of visually impaired children.

Parents of children with impairments have the same expectation about the future of their children as parents of children without disabilities, namely that they will be happy and able to live as independently as possible. That was the conclusion in a kick off meeting with parents in Ukraine.

But they said we need support.

Sometimes I think we, as professionals, have made parents dependent. Many of us have as backgrounds professional

care and education in segregated institutes. Parents became familiar with the idea that the best way for education is a special school or centre.

There is nevertheless a growing consciousness that they, the parents themselves, are responsible for the education of their child but that they cannot accomplish this without the support of the professionals. Professionals should not take over the responsibility of the parents but have to listen to what they need.

In this way, the professionals are the partners of the parents. Together they try to find what is the best education and rehabilitation of the child. The professionals have to support the parents and the child by developing and implementing the individual support plan, ISP. That means always early intervention.

The individual support plan is based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, the ICF of the WHO.

The ICF Applications are useful;

At the individual level for:

- Assessment
- Treatment planning
- Self -evaluation

At institutional level for:

- educational and training purposes

- quality improvement
- resource planning and development
- outcome evaluation

At the social level for:

- eligibility criteria for state entitlements such as social security benefits, disability pensions etc.
- social policy development
- needs assessments
- environmental assessment for universal design

The gateway to full membership of the society is education- Education that starts with early intervention. Parents have the right to get support from the moment they know that the child has a disability. Medical support is not enough. Parents must be given support in how to help the child in his development, at home, in kindergarten, in primary school, and in secondary school.

People with disabilities need lifelong, time by time support such as when learning to use a computer, to find a good job or to engage at leisure activities.

Professionals are of vital interest for the support of parents, children, and teachers of kindergarten and mainstream schools.

Without their expertise, it is not possible to develop and implement a good individual support plan.

To make this happen, the partnership of parents, professionals and policymakers is a condition, but the parents dream and wishes are leading. Furthermore, the special school can become a centre of education and rehabilitation for all children with a visual impairment. A centre with an outreaching program, at the forefront.

For that matter this concerns people with other disabilities as well.

Coming back to my experiences in the setting of people with intellectual disabilities, my first experience in the field of service providing.

The residential setting for the persons with intellectual disabilities has now been broken down. They all live in different places and lead a normal life with support tailored to their needs. The people are the same but the professionals and policy makers have listened to parents and changed their concept.

I hope this conference offers the opportunity for discussion, to exchange experiences and will inspire us all. The only way out is the way in ourselves.

Hans Welling,

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