

Joke Ellenkamp

Structures towards emancipation, participation and solidarity.

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

It's a pleasure for me to share some of your time at this STEPS meeting. For me it's very special to give you a warm welcome in my city, Rotterdam and the city in which PameijerKeerkring is one of the partners for intellectual disabled people.

I am Joke Ellenkamp, general manager of the PameijerKeerkring Foundation and RIBW Rijnmond Foundation. We offer a wide range of services and support to people with handicaps of various age groups in the greater area of Rotterdam. PameijerKeerkring supports people with intellectual disabilities in all areas of life from living, working and education to leisure time and social contacts.

The basic assumption of our organisation is the conviction that people with disabilities have a right to live a normal life. They should be able to participate in community as much as possible.

In general you can say that people really come to life when they make contact with someone who actively and faithfully works to understand what they want to say.

When people communicate in unconventional ways, or when they have been rendered invisible by an environment that discounts the worth of their communication, the effects of listening can be profoundly energizing. Those who communicate without words, those who use words and symbols in unique ways, and those who communicate within the drama of their behaviour call on their listeners whole emotional, mental and spiritual selves.

They remind us that listening is much more than passing strings of words from mouth to ear.

Listening is resonating in body, in imagination and in spirit.

Listening to people who live with the consequences of a lifetime of isolation and discrimination is often painful, frightening and exciting.

To improve our ability to listen, it is important to examine three dimensions of our listening.

1. where we listen from
2. what we listen for
3. how we listen

The first dimension of listening has to do with standing beside the people, close enough to hear each other but also with the ability to understand each other. It requires openness from the listener and an attitude to try to find answers.

The second dimension of listening has to do with what we listen for. We listen best when we encourage people to have a possibility to make a choice and to give them a place to participate.

And the last way of listening has to do with how we listen. We listen best when we listen with care and without feeling pity. Care means acknowledging vulnerabilities, fears, disappointments and failures and the way a person understands these experiences and finds the courage to keep on. Care means an active interest in taking the person's point of view and seeing how her actions make sense to her.

When you listen this way you really know what a person with intellectual disabilities really wants to do, how they want to live.

Although listening is the first step in understanding each other there is still a lot of work to be done even if you can listen very well.

Real participation and integration of people with intellectual disabilities in normal living situations is sometimes a step too far ahead. Recently our National Social and Cultural Service Bureau published a report about the position of people with intellectual disabilities in our society. And although our society is not negative towards participation of people with intellectual disabilities and community care is introduced as an important concept of policy, the situation is at this moment far from real social integration.

People with intellectual disabilities need to be treated as human beings with sex, gender, age, ethnic and religious backgrounds when you really want to face them as equal partners according to the UN Standard rules on Equalization of Opportunities for people with disabilities.

Equal citizens are people who have access to the material, cultural and social goods and also to work, housing and friendship.

A recent survey of the National Knowledge Network on intellectual disabled people comes to the conclusion that only a few intellectual disabled people succeed in living as a citizen within

the community with individual support delivered by society. A society that can be described as an inclusive society. An inclusive society has the following characteristics:

1. it offers the possibility to take part in living with different people;
2. it is a society where it is possible to have access to social networks;
3. in the society is a positive attitude towards people with intellectual disabilities;
4. there is access to regular services;
5. law and regulations are flexible so that they really facilitate life in the community.

And although more and more clients ask us to provide more individual oriented services that does not mean that they become really equal citizens in this society.

Therefore actions are needed on very different levels varying from political levels to building structures with all kinds of organizations and networks in neighbourhoods.

It's therefore of great importance to be in contact with each other at this STEPS level. We need to exchange good experiences. I am interested what your opinion is about the pilot OMIJ/Pameijerkeerring, of the little steps in trying to find new ways for day activities for our clients.

And I started with listening. I hope this meeting will give you enough time to listen to each other on the different ways of listening. Self reflection is important in this way even on European Union basis. Because the situation in all our different countries is not unique. And what really connects us is the position of people with intellectual disabilities. They are often marginalized and although they have the full right to participate in society it's far from the real situation.

Combatting exclusion and discrimination of people with intellectual disabilities is an important goal for all of us, now and in the future.

We can choose between optimism and pessimism. Making a choice means choosing between finding final answers or despair. Despair is a state of mind people find themselves in when they lose faith in the search for final answers. I hope we are so truly convinced that we find those new ways that we get a lot of energy to work on new methods, structures and networks to work for equality.

I hope this meeting will give us all the spirit to listen to each other on different levels and help each other to learn from different good experiences. I hope when you will go home afterwards it will be with lots of new energy and ideas and I hope you will enjoy your stay in our city.