

“Age Appropriate”, One of the Keys to Success

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For decades in the Netherlands, youth with intellectual disabilities had no obligations to participate in society. All they had were rights: the right to receive an allowance; the right of being taken care of; and the right of some day care. They had no social appreciated role in society which prevented their integration.

Previously, students with intellectual disabilities went to a special education school by taxi. When they finished school at 20 years old, they went to daycare or to social workplaces. In daycare, they participated in creative and relaxing activities. In the social workplace, they participated in simple activities such as putting screws in plastic bags, folding cardboard boxes, etc. In their free time they went to special sporting clubs only for individuals with intellectual disabilities. In summary, it was impossible for them to integrate into society. The world of the individual with intellectual disabilities was kept strictly separate from the world of others.

This was not intentional. It started out as an idea that society should take care of individuals with intellectual disabilities. The care of a child with an intellectual disability should not only be the care of his/hers parents, but of society. However, this whole idea had become rigid. There has been no place for differing choices. When you had an intellectual disability you must follow the described way of life. You may not visit a primary school or a normal sporting club if you had an intellectual disability. It required great efforts from parents to allow visits to elementary schools. The number of angry parents, supported by teachers and coaches, increased. They advocated that this system was not good for the well-being of individuals, especially for those with intellectual disabilities. It took many decades for the Dutch Government to change the rules and subscribe to the vision, "Individuals with intellectual disabilities have the right to a socially appreciated role in society."

De Hoge Brug (The High Bridge) is a special education school for students with intellectual disabilities. The students attend the school when they have a Total Intelligent Quotient under 55. The average T.I.Q is about 40. The previous focus of the school was only on the developing age of a student. The mission of the school was to "make every student as independent as possible". Due to financial cuts from the Government, schools such as De Hoge Brug have developed a new goal, "to bring as many students as possible to work." The purpose of this vision was when individuals are working, less government allowance is required. In the last few years some individuals with intellectual disabilities participated in work environments. However, they did not keep their job for a long time, despite being supported by a job coach. Some were fired within a few months; others stopped working by choice. It wasn't due to a lack of appropriate working skills or loyalty to the company. It was related to the relationship with their working colleagues. They were not able to communicate because they misunderstood social cues and were isolated.

Recently, De Hoge Brug began to embrace the vision of inclusion. Its current mission is, "To give students the necessary tools, including independence, so that they are valued and important to society." The school program focuses on building independence and fostering working skills, primarily on age appropriate activities. Students are treated with respect similar to their age appropriate peers. The vision includes treating them as you treat their peers, talking to them as you talk to their peers, teaching them as you teach their peers and

having high expectations. The students then learn to become responsible with valuable age appropriate relationships. The students attend a school camp abroad. They learn to ski or to snowboard in the Czech Republic. In the past three years, every year, 12 students go to Gambia for two weeks to help build classrooms. During the school year, they raise money for this trip. Students from De Hoge Brug who go to work are now able to keep their jobs. They have positive interactions with their colleagues and are seen as valuable employees and members of society.