

SPOTinar: Thinking Outside the Box - Global Challenges, Local Occupational Solutions

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Why think outside the box? As an Occupational Therapist – Hanneke started at an academic hospital in the Netherlands. She did not like the OT and found it silly – but why? At the time she became an OT (50 years ago) you rehabilitated people till they were “normal” and then maybe they could work, go to school and then you started looking at the environment. The methods back then seemed inefficient and were a frustrating experience.

When to Kenya where she worked for the government and working association. Here she had to make sure that 200 persons a year could get back to work.

People first wanted to work and then they would consider doing surgery later on. This was the opposite strategy of the one from the Netherlands. Some patients would become more handicapped from getting assistive devices. The people in Kenya wanted to earn their living and have a family – they did not always want surgery, as it made them slower.

When the wall went down between eastern and western Europe – then they wanted Eastern European countries to have their human rights, especially for people with functional disabilities. Since then, Hanneke has worked on developing OT schools in 10 different eastern European countries.

Current challenges are climate changes, pollution, food and water insecurity, increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, migration, refugee rights, increase in chronic diseases, growing burden on informal carers, pandemic preparation, lack of/limited access to education, accessibility of information/disinformation, authoritarianism, poverty and growing social & health inequality.

These challenges are leading to a higher complexity within society, and that also requires a more complex and different type of healthcare system.



A lot of these problems come from inequalities – that is why we must **mind the gap**. If we talk about street children, then we can change the child. But it will be futile if we do not change the society that creates criminality, poverty and discrimination. Therefore, our work must be focused on society more than on the individual.

There are not enough Occupational Therapists in each country to work with individuals – therefore we would be more effective to be agents of change if we work with societal problems.

Are we the right professionals to help? Can we do something as OTs?

Doing, being, becoming, belonging! A. Wilcock, 1998

That is the perspective that we work from as Occupational Therapists and guide us to create powerful change within a community.

A clear relationship between the doing of the social view of humans and the medical view of humans. We always question if we should approach the social or the medical perspective. Doing so can close the gap between the medical view and the social view of humans.

Occupation has transformative power. It is not only a means or an end to better participation. Occupation (collective/doing together) can in itself be a means for transforming social relations, communities, neighbourhoods and society.

Football is used to transform homeless communities. By organising football for homeless people they learn the rules of the game BUT they also change. They often go back to their families and help with the healing. Therefore, Occupation can heal a bigger group.

The Way Forward

Integrated Care System (WHO 2015)

Focusing on Sustainable Development (Goals – UN 2015); Occupation-Based Community Development

Different, Social Accountable Education and Practice (UNESCO, Bologna, Tuning Africa, WHO 2008, 2015)

We must change our ways if we want to be effective as a profession. It does not help to work with one criminal if you want to help a community with high crime rates.

Work with development rather than treatment. We need to create an enabling environment, empower the people, and coordinate social and educational and other services.

If we start working with the person, then we need to look at the family community and beyond.

Health relates to food, hygiene, water, education etc. If we work with the environment, then we can do much more.

Is Occupational Therapy a Social Accountable Profession?

WHO says a socially accountable profession needs to prioritise its research and services towards the most vulnerable communities within the country. Often Occupational Therapists do not work with the most vulnerable.

If we want to work differently then we must look closely at systems. If the healthcare system is accessible for people with disabilities. The same goes for education, employment and more. Many obstacles are within the system – and if we do not change that, then we will always have inequality. To change the system, we need to work creatively and involve all groups to participate, as well as have a clear vision as to where we want to go. If you have this approach, then you can begin doing important work.

We first must raise occupational consciousness about the injustices and how they are created. And cooperate towards creating better circumstances on local, national, and international levels. The Participatory Occupational Justice Framework (PJOF) is useful for addressing the systemic issues of injustice from an occupational perspective.

Case Example – Lack of/and limited Access to Education

This mother suddenly realised that a serious learning disability would never recover fully. The Georgian Law said at the time that education for disabled children was not allowed. The mother hoped that the child could get to school by being in the rehabilitation service so that she could work. There was no social protection for the mother – and therefore a big responsibility.

So how do we empower this mother? The Occupational Therapist found a group of other mothers (five) where each of them had a day where they looked after the kids for one day a week each so that they could work four days a week. The OTs also taught them how to play and help the children. The mothers found schools that could include children with disabilities. Here they found that the non-disabled children's parents did not want disabled kids at the school. So, the OTs made seminars about inclusion with teachers, parents, and children. Still, there was the problem with it being against the law. The UN says that all children are allowed an education, and therefore they discovered that the government did something that was not allowed. The big group that they had gathered managed to implement a pilot at the three schools, and if they would prove to be successful, they would consider changing the law. The pilot managed to be successful so that after one year the government made a position to make a law of inclusion in education, where they hired an Occupational Therapist. By focusing on the system, they managed to change the system to be more inclusive.

There are still struggles but now policy laws are in place that creates a path for inclusion.

The strategic reasoning and occupational-based development resulted in:

- A social network where mothers take turns to take responsibility for the care of the children and others could work.
- An advocacy parent-group lobbying for inclusive education
- Stakeholders' participation in developing an inclusive school as a pilot project
- Stakeholders' participation in changing the law
- An occupational therapist appointed as a policy maker for inclusive education in the Ministry of Education
- A renewed curriculum for primary teachers with one obligatory year of inclusive education (with input from occupational therapists)

They managed to address social inclusion on the individual level and then moved up towards the local level, and beyond to the national level. Still requires work as the stigmatisation is still very much alive.

This gives an example of how to work with the community. Where you start with the individual and go up towards a national level or further.

Case Example -With whom should you partner in a disadvantaged neighbourhood?

What to do? Not everyone gets in contact with an OT.

The Minister for Housing in the Netherlands said that 20 areas in the Netherlands have problems with criminality, and dropouts of education – and that they hope it will improve.

The Minister has no idea about what to do – they just define that there is a problem.

Some OTs acted within one area in Amsterdam. They wanted to create a pilot project. You start with strategic thinking: ask questions as to why they are excluded. Why is there criminality? Should you start with the people who drop out of school?

They started working with the schools that had a lot of problems. At first, the school was not very interested since they already had psychologists, social workers etc. which did not create change. The problem was medicalized and they focused on the children with problems. The children were said to have ADHD, autism etc. They decided to start from an occupational perspective without excluding anyone and pointing at a particular problem. So, they asked what everyday life was like for the kids from 06:00 AM to 10:00 PM.

With the teachers, they looked at the diaries. They discovered that the children who were difficult in the classroom did not get any breakfast. Another thing was that a lot of the children came from families where nobody had worked for generations – so the children had no role models. Some were not helped after school or had any type of play. Summarised, no breakfast, no role models, and working parents. A systematic problem occurred. They started with a breakfast project and involved the parents in the breakfast. This was the first integrative meeting of parents from different backgrounds, and also where parents became interested. It did not focus on parenting skills but rather on what the school can do (provide breakfast x3 times a week). This also resulted in some parents helping modernise some outworn rooms at the school.

Criminality was primarily at supermarkets, so they asked the supermarket if they wanted to work with them. They offered that children from the school could work at the supermarket a few times a week. This reduced criminality and the children were taught how to count, read and other practical skills. They then started projects with the police, firemen, and cycle repair shops to help create more work for the children and teach them about various professions. This reduced criminality further and more cohesion in the area. Instead of giving the children a diagnostic term, they improved the environment.

Occupation can create cohesion between those who know and those who do not know.

The overall results were:

- Fewer dropouts of the school
- Young adults have a future perspective on jobs
- Improved cohesion, relationships between school, parents, shops, police and so forth
- New initiatives in the neighbourhood. An example being a community garden

Understanding where inequality comes from can help everybody.

The message of the WHO

Inequalities in health exist in all countries and are considered unacceptable.

The Commission on the social determinants of health (WHO, 2008) tells us: “Social injustice is killing people on a grand scale.”

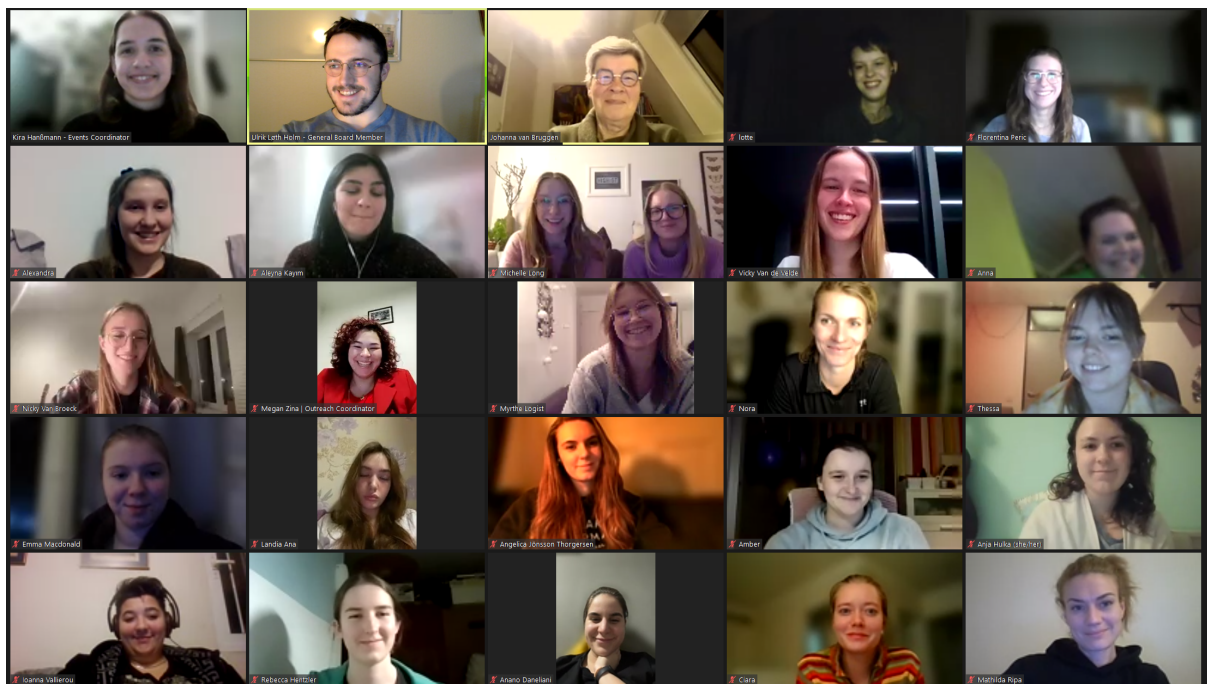
Poverty is a part of the developmental goals to tackle inequality. Poverty is everybody's problem. People in poverty will put more pressure on the healthcare system by becoming sick due to cold houses, as they cannot pay the energy bills and as a result, they become sicker. Another example of why it is an everybody problem is demonstrated in the *Case Example -With whom should you partner in a disadvantaged neighbourhood?*

The reduction of poverty is a process which goes far beyond material and financial assistance. It needs to include strategies to diminish vulnerability and discrimination and to promote social inclusion and participation in all life areas (Bruggen v H et al, 2010).

In all projects, you need to be sure that you are connected to a local or a global policy. The global sustainable goals are always good to refer to.

Important message: All students start looking at the individual without looking at where the problem is coming from. If you can think strategically then you can create important change that has longevity.

Education is currently too westernised and individual-focused. It needs more flexibility and to be able to understand the origin of societal problems, as well as how occupational therapy can contribute.



You are always welcome to ask Hanneke for help with a project by emailing her.

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