

Experiences with Person-Centred Planning in South Tyrol, Italy

By Sascha Plangger

For Elmar, a 16-year-old boy with learning difficulties, the days and weeks are very much the same. Every morning he goes to school in a special bus for people with disabilities and returns home in the evening to spend most of his time with his parents.

His mother says that as a child Elmar always played with his friends and was a welcome guest at birthday parties. At that time, he still attended primary school in his own village. When he was 11, he changed to a middle school and then at 14, to a vocational school 30 kilometres away from his hometown. With every transition, the friendships and relations with people in his village got less. In the evenings and weekends since then, he often sat in front of the TV alone and watched the videos of the performances of the local orchestra and of the theatre group his brother plays in. Elmer drummed the beat of the music on a kitchen pot or replayed the scenes of the plays for himself.

This was nine years ago. At that time, I worked in a training and education organisation together with a network of parents of disabled children. We organised a workshop with Ines Boban, an experienced trainer and facilitator in person-centred planning and circles of support, from Germany, to help people with disabilities realise their dreams and wishes. By sharing lots of examples, Ines showed us how to organise circles of support and how MAP and PATH, both person centred planning approaches can be used. Her enthusiasm motivated us to use person-centred methods and popularise them through our work.

A few weeks after the workshop, I got to know Elmar's mother. She told me about her sorrows and fears: Elmar, who was generally a life-affirming person, was getting increasingly isolated and sad. I suggested she consider person-centred planning to help her son find his path in life. While Elmar's mother was enthusiastic about this idea, for me, it was to jump in at the deep end. I prepared and arranged the person-centred planning meeting together with Juliane Stocker as co-facilitator. Juliane was at that time an integration teacher, teaching children with learning difficulties in a school and was familiar with person-centred methods for people with disabilities.

Elmar was enthusiastic to try this approach and we met several times to talk about his wishes, dreams and fears. We planned the meeting with the circle of support and thought about who should be invited to the planning meeting. The day before his 17th birthday, our first person-centred planning meeting took place. The living room was filled with people. Elmar had invited a lot of well-known village personalities and all of them brought suggestions about how to get him involved in village life. Soon after Elmar became an active member of the orchestra, he got his first role in a play and a group of young people started taking him to events. Elmar became an active member of the community again and since then, has got a job as a helper at the 'commune' which is our village community group. The dreams he had shared at the start of the process have become real life now.

Elmar is my "North Star". His experience impressed upon me how powerful and positive person-centred planning can be for disabled people. It encouraged me to work with the parents network to arrange information events all over South Tyrol, to share information about person-centred planning as much as possible. In 2005, we started our "Never Ending Tour", which brought person-centred planning to the attention of numerous parents and disabled people, as well as several large organisations like the welfare department, schools and further education agencies.

In 2007, the *Lebenshilfe*, a service provider for people with disability in South Tyrol dedicated their cover story and some additional articles in their magazine '*Perspective*' to our work in South Tyrol. In that year, Juliane Stocker worked as a coordinator for integration at a local middle school and realised a project for inclusive vocational orientation for disabled students. This was mainly based on person-centred thinking and planning. The project was awarded a prize for innovation in integration by the local education authority.

Around the same time, Ines Boban was invited to South Tyrol for further training and to facilitate a number of person-centred planning meetings. Together with Margot Pohl and Angela Woldrich, who had been trained by Ines Boban and worked as facilitators I also facilitated a few meetings and between us, we built up a number of positive experiences to ensure that person-centred planning in South Tyrol is now very well known.

But as we became more successful and reached an increasing number of people, at the same time we hit a critical point which slowed down our advance. This was because of a number of reasons:

- There are too few facilitators that have learned the methods and have practical experiences with person-centred planning. We are, unfortunately, not able to deal with all requests and have had to reject and disappoint people who had put all their hopes on the potential of person-centred planning.
- There is a lack of financial resources to make person-centred planning accessible for lots of people.
- There is no coordinating structure or organisation that offers person-centred planning. What we have achieved so far has to a large extent grown because of the dedication of volunteers, but it is a very unsystematic way of working.
- We are confronted with dismissive attitudes from particular institutions for people with disability. They see it as their duty to continuously improve the institutional services for disabled people but they have no intention of changing them. Person-centred planning, “and the support of inclusive practices and structures are often subordinated to institutional interests.
- There is a lack of socio-political strategies orientated on civil rights to extending the system in order to include more people.

By this stage, we found we had made some important steps, reached a lot of people with our events and made person-centred planning an accepted way of working to improve the lives of disabled people. Still, we had not yet managed to change organisations or have an impact at a socio-political level. We found ourselves in a dead end street!

The change came in autumn 2009. I had the opportunity to cooperate with the project “New Path to Inclusion” and participate in particular modules. This international exchange of experiences disclosed new perspectives and ways to implement person centred planning. After each meeting, I turned back home with a suitcase full of ideas and in autumn, we took the opportunity to apply for a project at the European Social

Funds with the objective of adapting and implementing the results of the New Path to Inclusion project in South Tyrol. We wanted to do this in a way to achieve a sustainable and changing effect on the institutional structures.

The next step and the orientation of the project would be to incorporate strategies and methods for organisational and wider structural systems change. We looked for alliance partners who would support our ideas - we wanted to win important federal departments for our plan.

We felt that another area that had strategic importance was to encourage the implementation of person-centred thinking and planning during the transition from school to work. Like in the rest of Italy, also in South Tyrol special education schools had been closed by law in 1977.

Nowadays, all public schools are open for disabled students right through until they are 18. They can choose freely their further education once they complete their general education at 14. All classes with disabled students have integration teachers at all levels. Students with a higher need of support also have the right to an integration assistant, who is personally assigned to them and gives them constant assistance and care.

Because schools are an integrative area, they are predisposed to incorporate person-centred planning. As Elmar's experience shows – and his case is regrettably a typical example – opportunities for social contact and participation decrease as disabled students make the transition from middle school into further education school. Disabled students need, especially in these transition phases, good support, and the guarantee that they can maintain social networks. There are important decisions to be made during this time which can significantly influence the future path of life.

Good support, guaranteed by person-centred planning, can change the path of life in a positive way, which all too often in South Tyrol ends in sheltered workshops. It provides an alternative direction so a young, disabled person's dreams – like Elmar's - can be realised. We are still in the starting blocks with our project, but I am hoping to tell you a further success story from South Tyrol in two years time.