

Foreword

Helga Stevens

The themes of the International Conference on Sign Language, Sustainable Development, and Equal Opportunities are all of great importance to the Deaf community in Flanders and in the world. Sign language is the preferred language of many deaf people, including those who are born into hearing families, simply because sign language is so easily acquired and because sign language is in itself visual. We can thus view and understand this language much more easily and in a more natural way than spoken language. The latter is much harder for us to learn and even more difficult to use and understand. I have already said it many times, and I will continue to repeat it: Sign language is the key to inclusion for deaf people in our society. Sign language is thus essential and of vital importance for deaf people. Without sign language we would be really handicapped and limited in our possibilities to participate in society. It is sad that there are still people in deaf pedagogics who are not convinced of the importance of sign language for deaf children and adults.

This leads us to another theme of this conference: Equal opportunities. Without sign language, there are simply no equal opportunities for deaf people, let alone deaf children. I have already mentioned that without sign language we are handicapped. That is why I am very proud to say that as a member of the Flemish Parliament, I have been able to include the right to the provision of Flemish Sign Language interpreting services in regular education into the Flemish education law. Fevlado and the Flemish Deaf community lobbied the Flemish Minister of Education for about 20 years to achieve this, and still there is work to be done. There is a huge shortage of Flemish Sign Language interpreters, and the working circumstances of our interpreters are still far from ideal. Nevertheless, the insertion of the right to the provision of sign language interpreting support in Flemish educational law is an important milestone for the Flemish Deaf community, and it is up to us to ensure that all deaf children in regular education really do receive sign language interpreting assistance.

However, it is sad to note that some deaf schools still doubt or ignore the advantages of sign language interpreting. Some even go so far as to try to influence parents of deaf pupils and teachers that they should refrain from requesting sign language interpreters in the classroom. This is completely incomprehensible to me and, in fact, absolutely not justified. I really do wonder on what basis counsellors from deaf schools think it is appropriate to judge that sign language interpreting

services are not necessary and that deaf children can do well in a classroom without interpreters. Have they ever considered the long-term consequences for the social and intellectual development of deaf children and for the inclusion of deaf children in the classroom?

The next theme of this conference—sustainability—at times seems far away from deaf education. Different views of education for deaf children have existed for a long time and have been in conflict with each other. In this conflict, the interests of deaf children are often forgotten, thus threatening their right to a high-quality education. Statistics show that sustainability is nowhere to be seen. The number of deaf children who leave secondary school with a diploma, thus giving them access to advanced or university studies, remains scandalously low. The number of students in vocational secondary education remains comparatively high. We have known for a long time that deaf children are statistically seen as not as smart as their hearing counterparts. This explains why a lot more deaf children have ended up in vocational education, their capabilities thus remaining greatly untapped. This is a recipe for disaster because our society really needs all talents in view of the ageing of our society. In other words, deaf people risk missing the boat in the war on talents.

There is also no sustainability in our education. Little attention is being paid to the emotional and social well-being and development of our deaf children, which should be going hand-in-hand with their intellectual development. This is logical because everything is connected. Add to this the fact that about 95% of deaf children grow up in hearing families who are not familiar with deafness. It is terrible to see how our system is dealing with deaf children. People still continue to think and work from a *hearing* frame of reference without taking into account that the frame of reference for deaf children is completely different. That is, spoken language is not as accessible to deaf children as is sign language and deaf children thus encounter many obstacles when they interact with the environment around them, which is often predominantly hearing. People too often assume that deaf children can take care of themselves and that they will do just fine. Deaf children indeed have to learn how to function in a predominantly hearing world, but this does not mean that we should ignore their needs. They are visually oriented, and they have a real need for a sign language environment, even when they are doing just fine and it looks like they do not need it.

For me, it is a sign of respect for the uniqueness of deaf children to take into account their difference and to make sure that we really offer them full access to communication—not only the language of their environment (that is, spoken language), but also sign language. I think it is rather strange that hearing children are being encouraged by all means to acquire more than one language while the same

reasoning is not applied to deaf children. Knowing a sign language provides a real added value to deaf children. Even more importantly, through sign language, these deaf children can become members of a larger social group, namely the Deaf community. In a world where identity and language are so determining, we do not have the right to keep deaf children away from their roots. It is our duty to ensure that all deaf children have the opportunity to become rooted in both the hearing and the Deaf communities and develop a strong identity as a deaf sign language user in a predominantly hearing world.