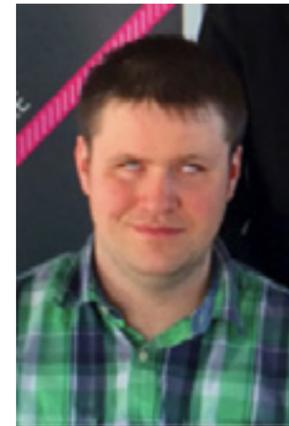




TdiverS

Teaching diverse learners in (School) Subjects



(CET brochure 2015)

TdiverS Interview: Teacher in Inclusive Education

PATRICK HURST

“Diverse Teachers Teaching Diverse Learners”

Interview (edited) with Patrick Hurst, English teacher at the comprehensive secondary school Lycée Ermesinde, located in Mersch, Luxembourg; Michelle Brendel (inclusion researcher, mother of two Lycée Ermesinde graduates); Justin Powell (inclusion researcher)

Patrick Hurst (PH): I am 34 years old, and I started my school career here in Mersch actually, at a primary school. So I grew up in a children’s village here in Mersch and I went to Mersch primary school. I was indeed one of the first pupils to be, well, at the time they call it integrated, talked about integration, as a student with a disability in a normal class so to speak. (...) For one day in a week I went to the blind school, to the Institut pour Déficients Visuels in Bertrange, and there I learned some of the special skills such as Braille, or mobility training using white cane or so. After the primary school actually I went to France to a boarding school that also had a blind school that could provide me more help to continue my studies in the secondary school. Because at the time we didn’t have computers and tablets and laptops like we do today I used mechanical Braille machine that was very noisy so it was difficult for teachers to accept blind students in class and everything had to be typed (...) or translated manually and that required a lot of work for other people actually. I think that technology changed a lot in the recent years.

PH: So why did I decided to become a teacher ? I quickly noticed that in France I had a huge advantage over the other students as far as languages were concerned so I can help them in German and in English. Well I used my advantage actually to help other students. That’s why

I decided to go on studying language at Nancy University. I started (working) at Neie Lycée in 2006, and I’m doing team teaching with other colleagues, but I mainly do support work with smaller groups of students of two, three, four students maximum. So I am working on speaking skills, comprehension or reading comprehension and so on. If they need it, I work with them on written works that they have to prepare at home, or if they have grammar problems I can work with them. If they write their work on the compute, if their work is typed, I can easily correct it on my Braille device.

Justin Powell (JP): So you still use Braille?

PH: Yes, but today it is computer-based actually, not a machine with paper, but refreshable Braille display that connects to another computer or laptop or even a smart phone—to read what students have written.

JP: Do you have a dedicated classroom where students can come to get help?

PH: They come to my office, but I am with two or three other teachers in my office, so sometimes I go to the next door classroom. Because we are working in teams here, we are teaching teams, and each team takes charge of about three or four classes, a maximum of fifty to seventy students.

PH: You asked the question of diversity; how it is defined at Lycée Ermesinde. We define through a wide range of things we offer so students can either have individual study periods when they work on their own, they can go our huge library downstairs. There are subject centers where there is always an adult specialist in one or the other subject that can help the student. And also there is tutoring that the students can rely on, so each adult has about ten students to tutor. We meet the students regularly (once a week) to discuss how he or she is going on, what they are doing, what their personal work plan (travail personnel) says.

JP: So this tutoring plan is that an explicit response to student diversity?

PH: It is part of our concept. We think that every student needs one or the other form of support that can be related to real learning difficulties, but can also have to do with orientation of what you want to do later, if you want to go on a technique (vocational) curriculum, if you want to go to university. We have different activities — what we call factories — all the activities you do outside of school. Like the café downstairs can be such an activity, theater and show business, a lot of activities around music, around arts and crafts, but also about cooking. These are things the students can also get exposed to, or get to know jobs. Diversity is also exposing the student to many situations.

JP: So this tutoring plan is that an explicit response to student diversity?

PH: It is part of our concept. We think that every student needs one or the other form of support that can be related to real learning difficulties, but can also have to do with orientation of what you want to do later, if you want to go on a technique (vocational) curriculum, if you want to go to university. We have different activities — what we call factories — all the activities you do outside of school. Like the café downstairs can be such an activity, theater and show business, a lot of activities around music, around arts and crafts, but also about cooking. These are things the students can also get exposed to, or get to know jobs. Diversity is also exposing the student to many situations.

JP: How do you as a teacher and in the school respond to those with specific disabilities, what kind of support system do you offer?

PH: I personally haven't had any student with a disability so far, that's what I think is a bit strange actually. We have a building and an infrastructure that is quite ideal, or would be ideal for students with a disability, but we actually don't have many students with disabilities. We had a few students with dyslexia, but we don't have disabled students at all now.

JP: What is the reason for that, you mentioned that you have an ideal infrastructure in this large and very new building?

PH: I think the problem is the pre-selection in primary schools actually. When I talk to other teachers here, they feel disability is still like a burden, so they are still reluctant to accepting children, pupils with disabilities in their class. They feel they don't get enough support and that's the main problem. If students already lag behind in the primary school then it is obvious they don't have access to secondary education. But we definitely would have excellent possibilities, because, besides you have probably seen that we have another high school here. What school has so many adults and also continuing education teachers on the same site? So, I think we would have excellent conditions to study inclusion; to try some things out.

JP: We know that a lot of the barriers to inclusion are not so much in a physical structures, but the barriers in people's minds?

PH: I am a president of Nëmme mat eis (only with us; a disability organization) and as such I participate in many sensitization events and that's what's I also try to do here at school. I am invited to many classes because at the beginning of each year especially the new students have many questions about how I work, how I get around the building so that's one important point to tell them what blind people can do. I participated in the theater performance last weekend... Some students were impressed to see me walk around the stage. (...) Learning by doing actually, overcome barriers, that's what I want to show them.

JP: What would you wish for?

PH: My biggest wish or my main wish would be a yea actually more proactive approach from the decision makers because actually, yes, the government has ratified the UN Convention that says that all children should be included in schools but actually there is no real proactive campaigning. (...) They will have to inform parents, to inform the society as a whole, because that's one of the main problems.

PH: I personally don't get many contacts to children with disabilities, I have the impression that many parents of children with disability struggle on their own. That's what we will have to strengthen as well to raise awareness from the ground up.

JP: What is unique about your school within Luxembourg, and the challenges that potentials for other schools to learn from your model?

PH: What's unique about our school is not only that we don't have marks like other schools in Luxembourg. The overall approach: that students have to define their personal goals, their personal projects, so they have to explore what they can do, what they like to do, what they are motivated in, and they have to choose their path accordingly, so that's also what

There should be more people with disability involved in teaching and in school, so that the children get used to living with people with disability.

JP: How did you, as teaching staff, create that model?

PH: This is the result of nearly ten years of work now in this school because we wanted to put the students motivations and interests in the center of all the things. In our classes students have to do contributions to the course along the personal project, the student can choose one subject where he feels strong enough to collaborate, to cooperate with the teacher. We want the student to give his input and his explanation and we think that's a more efficient way of learning, if one strong student can help other students. That's what I also did in my high-school career and that's why I like this school so much. Because we want the stronger students to help other students to help the class as a whole to understand certain subjects because he is a student he can well it is based on the peer teaching.

JP: You see your role as a facilitator, of students learning goals?

PH: Yes, that was the biggest idea, the biggest challenge. We want the students to produce something at the end of the lesson so last year there was a project on the First World War. They were quite creative in writing new songs, some wrote poems, some drew pictures, some made films. That's also what makes our school so unique, students don't produce only tests, narrow tests, but they can produce anything, an essay, a poem, a film, a song...

Michelle Brendel (MB): I think also, as you mentioned earlier, this fact of being so close to the world actual work and having also experts that come from professional groups participating in the activities. I think also that this mixture of teachers and other professionals that work very closely together in these projects is unique.

PH: Yes, that's it. We have a huge number of specialists, because they came from professional work: we have choreogra-

-phers, dance teachers, cooks who work actually with students so they are prepared to what they have to expect after school. And also the higher curriculum when they go to university; they have to do research papers over one year (a collective paper), so they even get to know how to collaborate in a group in a research project. That's what they are going to do at university later, and the next level in the deuxieme, they have to do an individual research, these prepare them for later work and for later university careers.

JP: How do you grade those very individual projects?

PH: We grade our works with skills descriptions because to realize these things, to achieve these things the student has to master certain skills. For example, handling research or doing experiments in science, studying art works, poetry styles and literature.

MB: So that's in a narrative form that you describe skills and competences and processes?

PH: Yes, except for the end class of the premier, when we have to adapt to the national system.

JP: From the perspective of a parent, Michelle, what would you say was the reason that you selected this unique school?

MB: It was not us selecting the school, it was our children!

PH: That was quite new ten years ago when they told the public that there would be a school where you can do circus and theater and cooking. That was quite revolutionary. It's often the children that actually want to come to the school, so we have two open day events during the year. Often the intention to come to Lycée Ermesinde is from the children and that's what we want to launch.

MB: I think for Fanny, who was already used to have teachers who support children's reflections and children's autonomy, when she had heard the headmaster

in a TV interview, she said: I want to go to that school, because they work the way I want to learn. And we were not so eager in the beginning to let her go into this experience, which was more like an experiment to us then. She was sure that this is the right thing to do that she even wrote a letter to the Minister to write that she is very supportive of this new school and she is going to attend the school.

MB: As a parent I think this tutor system is very important. Students feel taken very seriously, and it is not only looking for what you need, but also what are your next steps. For example, Fanny was a very good student and she was doing the minimum, and her tutor told her "What you're doing is not enough compared to what you are able to do."

PH: That's what our headmaster always says: In a normal school good students can go through only doing the minimum, but here, we want the so-called good students to contribute to the class, to share his knowledge, to share his skills, and in that way even to improve what you know and what you can do, and what you explain, and how you present yourself, how you present findings of the experiments and so on.

JP: How do you work pedagogically with these very different interests and skills? We don't want our students only to work on their strengths, but also to try to deal directly with the challenges they have in certain areas of learning. How do the teachers here in Ermesinde address that problem?

PH: That problem is addressed partly through the tutoring and through our subject centers. A teacher that notices weaknesses in one or the other area tells the student directly: "Well, you need to work on your grammar, or to work on your fractions, or to work on this or that essay". And then the student can, or should even come to these support offers to remediate, to read, to correct, to work on these things, and that's also what we take into account in our evaluations. So, we not only say that the student has achieved this and that level, but we say the student has made a real effort to get there. Or we can also say that the student has

achieved this work without making an effort. We take into account the effort that the student makes to improve his work or to improve the results.

JP: Do you have also some kind of system of peer evaluation?

PH: Yes, since they are working in groups, they give feedback to each other, so another less formal way of evaluating.

JP: You mentioned that you have different subject areas. In our project, we are interested in whether inclusive education is easier or how it can be realized in different school subjects? What kind of inclusive pedagogy do you work with in your subject area?

PH: I think in languages in general inclusive education is possible. You can diversify activities and also one strong advantage here is that students can create multiple outputs. That can be an essay, a theater sketch, a song. So I think multiple ways actually of making students learn or making students exposed to different things and to different situations...

JP: After ten years this is no longer only an experiment, but also a school that has many successes and has graduates who can speak very clearly and vocally about their experiences. Are there ways that you would imagine to share this model with other teachers in Luxembourg?

PH: On a personal basis, I am talking about what we are doing here in our school to anyone who is interested. I am pleased to talk about the work I am doing. Teachers explicitly want to come to Lycée Ermesinde, but we are not entirely free to recruit the teachers we want. I think our graduated students definitely speak for themselves: They are good advertisements for our school.