Innovation Journal
Interview with Gaston TERNES, Principal of Pathfinder school Lycée Aline Mayrisch LUXEMBOURG

Your vision

Ternes: The educational foundations of Lycée Aline Mayrisch reflect an ongoing process of the joining of constructive forces of all actors involved in the project, namely the management, teachers, parents, students, and members of the technical and administrative staff. Our motto, "To offer the young people who have been entrusted to us both roots and wings," summarizes an educational approach that pursues two tracks that are apparently antagonistic, but are paradoxically inseparable. These are the acquisition of knowledge, the development of skills, and methodological accompaniment, and on the other hand the invitation to be creative, engage in personal reflection and creative thinking, take responsibility, be autonomous, and the development of wings or flight.

For over ten years now, the real challenge that Lycée Aline Mayrisch has been facing is to develop a plan that offers diversified learning methods to enable its students to become the true authors of their own learning. The cornerstone of the educational approach is *an autonomous and responsible student*. We prefer the logic of "learning-centered student," over the expression of "learner-centered teaching."

Interesting or innovative practices that take place at our school

Ternes: Over twelve years we have developed a good expertise in terms of learning skills, differentiated classroom support groups, the increased role of parents, mediation training, and the education in the technology of communication and information thanks to our "one laptop per student" device: that means 1450 laptops for 1450 students from grade 7 to 13. We gradually introduced tables of computer skills to be acquired by each student. These skills are documented, evaluated, and certified. Each year, a week-long project prepares students to break from their habitual 30-hour lesson plans, and define a class project that relies heavily on the educational use of information technologies.

Each class holds a key to its classroom door, as well as to the electronics cabinet for the laptops. Students manage their own classrooms: they pursue their work in their own classrooms outside of their regular lesson plans, there is no theft, no willful damage, ...

Weekly emails to the student delegates in each class, or to all students, and a student committee assisted by a parliament, have become crucial structures for dialogue and critical

awareness.

Initiatives, such as the "challenges for 7e [grade 7]" and "IT certification", have considerably increased the skills and know-how of students and of their sense of assurance and self-confidence in life.

It took us three years to develop an operational and performance flowchart, a transparent and motivational management of the many initiatives, and a consensus of the most vital elements that make up the profile of our school today.

We subsequently agreed on a decision-making process at school level.

Finally, we developed a set of cross-cutting methods and computer skills indispensable and essential for the 21st century. These methods and skills are well documented and evaluated.

How are you making an impact?

Ternes: Evaluations carried out by an independent institute (ILRES) testifies to the good working environment created by the teachers, an environment which is rich in motivational activities and the mutual respect that exists between the students and their teachers.

Our final exam results are regularly in the top three at national level.

The new legislative texts bearing on the organization of the establishment take into account our ideas of networking teachers and the evaluation of schools in terms of their quality.

Your school's future plans

Ternes: We are focusing on common learning platforms to promote effective work carried out by the student outside of school hours and to organize a flexible flow of feedback between the teacher and his/her students. We want to promote more and more that such online learning is set up by our students in the form of applications, wikis, blogs, vlogs networked together with those of the teachers (LAML App, Interactive youth).

How our school is influencing others

Based on the idea of allowing a team to define a profile for a school over a period of one year, a common vision was adopted by our Minister for all of the most recently established schools. The duties and assignments of the teacher were nationally redefined to include hours of availability for parents, students, and to be continually trained in keeping with educational requirements.

In addition, many schools regularly draw on the expertise of our school in terms of learning skills, differentiated classroom support groups, the role of parents, mediation, and the education in the technology of communication and information thanks to our "one laptop per student" device.

Your role as a leader

Ternes: A project must first be focused on training, action and research work carried out by all its teachers. In other words, we have to create an environment in which teachers are the authors of their plans of action while allowing students to be the authors of their own learning. We must therefore set up project teams to function within the school establishment. Our school has identified four priorities for school development based on social skills, the opening of the school towards the outside world, effective learning in the classroom in increased cooperation and collaboration with parents, and the use of information and communication technology.

In an effort of consistency, coherence and scientific endeavor, it is important to enlist the support of expert minds and critical friends. We have initiated a Department for "Research and Projects" to ensure that these experiences are documented, concerted, developed, and evaluated.

Percentage of our staff that is developing leadership skills

Ternes: 100 per cent! A characteristic of our school is the principle of *collective intelligence*. An increased presence of high school teachers, beyond their regular class hours, is essential for disciplinary team work or interdisciplinary networking, for ongoing training, and an effective accompaniment of students. Indeed, the richness of a system does not only rely on the addition

or juxtaposition of isolated individuals: it is the fruit of their interaction. In the words of Jean Ghyssens[1]:

"What makes a school effective is a shared and common project, which engenders synchronized and coherent actions aiming at fostering progress in the student's learning process."

Accompanying young people can be so effective if there is consensus on values, requirements, and the school environment. For this purpose, it is necessary to promote a real debate at the school: our weekly departmental meetings with teachers in the same field, our weekend teacher training sessions for all the teaching staff, our plenary sessions, all contributing substantially to this debate, whose objective and aim should enable everyone to find an anchor point around which each can contribute his or her own history, individual perception, and unique personality. Furthermore, every teacher is developing leadership skills by taking an important part in this process.

Ways you involve our team

Ternes: Indeed, cooperation between teachers constitutes the best on-going professional training. In the words of Philippe Meirieu, a renowned French leading thinker of educational research : "Who is not continuously learning and facing a more or less resisting reality, can hardly call himself a teacher." The time that the steering groups, teachers of a same discipline, or the one united by a common project, take to discuss and consult each other, should not be considered as a duty. On the contrary, it is a great opportunity for the exchange of good practice and for personal improvement.

Regarding the academic disciplines, the quality of the teaching, is central to the "Misma"[2] groups.

As for the multidisciplinary approach, it is implemented by continuous research in the following areas:

- Living together in high school
- Opening the school to the world
- Class work and parent's involvement
- Communication and Information technologies

---

[1] *Gyssens, J (1998), professor, previous head-master and main educational advisor for the free schools of Namur and Luxembourg. In " Propositions", "Revue pédagogique de l'enseignement secondaire belge", mai-april 1998, p.3*

[2] *"Misma", Acronyme for "__Mir__ __s__chwätze __ma__teneen." (We talk together). Groups constituted of teachers of a same subject.*

As an Aline Mayrisch teacher you take the commitment to engage in both, subject and multidisciplinary structures. A flowchart outlines the functions, the competencies and the decision-making power of each group. At an institutional level, decisions are taken during plenary sessions or by the steering group. In general, they are binding for a period of two years and they are, when necessary, analysed and revised by the steering groups.

How do you recognize and encourage student leadership

Ternes: We gradually introduced tables of computer skills and interdisciplinary methods to be acquired by each student. These skills are documented, evaluated, and certified. Each year, a week-long project prepares students to break from their habitual 30-hour lesson plans, and define a class project that relies heavily on the educational use of information technologies.

In order to prepare young people to behave in a responsible and civic way, it is essential to teach them to socialise and to share. An example that perfectly illustrates the student commitment is the preferential project lead by some of our students. Together with an NGO, and for a period of three years, support and help is offered to disadvantaged young people. This initiative enables the students to discover new cultures and to experience the concept of solidarity.

Furthermore, the creation of a solidarity fund for the financially less advantaged students of our own school community underlines our efforts in helping to create a fairer world.

In addition, our school is characterised by its opening on the surrounding world. We regularly organise meetings between our students and personalities from the political, the cultural, or the media world. The subjects that are dealt with in the meetings are generally integrated within the courses. They are previously introduced by the teachers during class and are often followed by an assessment which can take various forms: further discussing on the subject, a written report on the experience, or concrete actions...

The development of specific rules, shared and respected by all, is essential for both, the student's learning process and the maintenance of a favourable learning environment. Within this context, cooperation with the students is essential: How can a student adhere to these rules without serious thinking and arguing? We are constantly reconsidering and discussing our rules in order to work more efficiently towards a common goal: the wellbeing of all!

However, educating also rhymes with firmness. In other words, not everything is debatable. Some fundamental rules have to be followed by all and do not admit any personal interpretation. It is well-known that rules have played a vital role within the smallest human communities. Therefore, it is of a paramount importance that the agreement which has been signed by the students, their parents and the teachers, is respected. This respect is a necessary

condition for the experience of challenging and rewarding moments. The concept of right and duty go hand in hand! I

Nevertheless, human beings have the right to make mistakes. Even more so, it is an essential part of their learning process.

What do you hope to achieve by being a Pathfinder School

After one year of Pathfinder school in 2010, followed by being a Mentor school in 2011, our school is now preparing for its second year as Mentor school, with always rewarding opportunities for encounters and exchanges offered and made possible by Microsoft.

We hope that we will connect and collaborate with other innovative high schools from around the world in order to share ideas and to learn from each other.

Finally, we hope to achieve more and more our favorite quote:

"This is education: ...to give the youth a taste of being a creator of his own self, looking at himself/herself from the outside, and being aware of the possibility of choosing a path (educere) and giving him/her all the necessary intellectual nourishment so that he may achieve and establish his project (educare). "(Albert Jacquard, one of the most famous French scientist and writer.)