

International TL

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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What comes to mind when you think about professional development? Usually, it's in-service days, workshops, university classes, or even academic readings. The reasons for personal development are also varied: professional growth, personal growth, and job requirements. Sometimes though, professional development comes in a form we least expect...

Four years ago I went on a two-week tour of France. It had been a lifelong dream, as I had been to Quebec several times and wanted to experience more of the French culture. The trip was fabulous and left me wanting more – to actually live in Europe. After looking at several options and job websites, I found a perfect fit ... Information and Technology Literacy Coordinator (combined teacher-librarian and ICT facilitator position) at the International School of Luxembourg (ISL). ISL is a PreK-12 school with approximately 1200 students, offering the International Baccalaureate program to upper school students. Also, while the ISL was founded in 1963 as the American School of Luxembourg, its name was changed in 1999 to reflect the diverse student population. At the time, all I knew about Luxembourg was that it shared a border with France - I was definitely interested!

After a whirlwind trip to a job fair in Ontario, I was offered the position and began the preparations required to move to another country. My first bit of professional growth was the paperwork involved in acquiring a work visa. It was an interesting and lengthy process. Thank goodness, I had the guidance of ISL or I would have been completely overwhelmed! Birth, marriage, and teaching certificates, copies of diplomas, resume, job contract, criminal check, copies of my passport...all of these items had to be notarized and sent off to the ISL for their immigration office. It was during this paperwork process that it suddenly occurred to me - I would be an immigrant! That reality became even more apparent after my arrival in Luxembourg when I had to get a temporary residency visa while staying at the hotel. I was no longer just a tourist! Landlords also required copies of my job contract, passport, and residency information before I was allowed to rent. A residency sticker was put into my passport and, after the second year, I received a separate residency card. As an immigrant, I became very familiar with the immigration and commune offices, as do most people living in Luxembourg, a country of immigrants. I definitely did not stand out as being 'different' in Luxembourg.

As an immigrant living in a foreign country, everything became a learning experience. I went from being an independent adult to asking for assistance with many things such as opening a bank account, getting a phone, making a doctor's appointment, and grocery shopping. Life becomes a script and an adventure at the same time! Thankfully, people were very willing to assist as most had experienced similar situations. Public transportation was also a new way of life and I became part of the walking culture that is typical of Europe. Residential and businesses blended together to make communities, and fortunately, living in the city centre placed me within walking distance of numerous amenities such as the school, bank, doctor, shopping, bakeries and gym; in fact, during my two years in Luxembourg, I did not have a car and rarely missed having one.

Working in a tuition-paid international school provided numerous professional and personal growth opportunities. The most interesting aspect was working in a diverse multicultural environment. While the language of instruction was English, the demographics of the school, among students and staff, included over 45 nationalities. How did this multi-nationalism affect teaching and the classroom? English abilities varied from native tongue to beginning English

and everything in between. Many children were learning their third or fourth language, depending on their backgrounds, with the exception being students from English-speaking countries who appear to cling to their unilingualism. This fact cause me to reflect many times about an interesting expectation: people living in English-speaking countries expect immigrants to speak English, yet when we travel, we expect the residents of the country we are visiting to be able to speak English to us. While students at ISL begin taking French in K and German in Grade 6, a student who completes all of the grades in the Luxembourg school system will eventually become fluent in Luxembourgish, French, German, and English.

Working with staff from diverse backgrounds also developed my understanding of different points of view and perspectives. While there were obvious barriers with different levels of English, there were also interesting social situations that developed when so many cultures were mixed together in a learning environment. The way situations were approached, whether behavior was considered rude, aggressive, or passive, methods of problem solving, social etiquette such as taking turns, and social expectations created interesting circumstances. For example, personal space: in some cultures, people stand very close to each other which may not only be a bit uncomfortable, but also if someone leaves too much space between people in a line, someone else may cut in thinking there is an opening. As well, people talking on the sidewalk or in an aisle will expect someone to go around them rather than for them to move and not obstruct the traffic. I learned to become a quick observer of human nature.

Speaking with someone from another English-speaking country did not always guarantee comprehension either as the countries had different names for items, expressions, pop culture, and cultural heritage. There were times I just had to say, 'I don't know what you mean'. For example, Luxembourg winters are similar to Vancouver and since it is such a walking culture and it rained a lot, it became necessary to purchase an umbrella and a pair of rubber boots. I had trouble finding rubber boots and one day I asked the deputy principal, where I could buy a pair. After a moment of silence, I was asked, 'do you mean 'wellies?' There was also the time I was walking by a classroom and overhead an assistant tell some students not to forget to bring their rubbers (erasers), I couldn't help but chuckle as I walked back to library.

Working in an international school also made me reflect upon language and literacy in different ways. Students were learning English at the same time they are learning curriculum. As a result, teachers often had the predicament of trying to differentiate if the student's difficulties were either language or ability, or perhaps both. As well, students may have learned concepts in their home language but did not know the English words. This inability to communicate often caused self-esteem issues or behavior problems. I also reflected about 'what is proper English?' These students were being exposed to many accents and different vocabularies so I ended up speaking a kind of universal standard form of English. It is interesting how natural it became to remove slang and colloquialisms from my speech. What is also interesting is how students helped each other. When I had my library classes and was talking with them, there was almost always someone who could help with a struggling student and translate. Some students were able to self-advocate and say they did not understand or would ask what a word meant. As a teacher of Grades K-2, I was amazed at how quickly I changed my way of teaching to meet the needs of students, and how sometimes I could not quickly recall certain words or phrases, having not heard or spoken them for a length of time.

While students were given a lot of support in their English development, they were also encouraged to maintain and use their home languages. There were many reasons behind this. One was to maintain confidence levels in their language and not undermine the language spoken at home; in fact, students were encouraged to share their portfolios with their parents in their home language during conferences. Another reason for encouraging home languages was that many families eventually did return to their home country and therefore it was beneficial for the students to have maintained their home language skills. A third reason is that students often had literacy skills in their home language,

and these skills needed to be acknowledged. Out on the playground, as the children played games, laughed and visited, I would hear all sorts of languages spoken; however, I also noticed that the older the students became, the less diversity of language was heard. To them, English had become the dominant and universal language.

During my two - year contract, I had amazing professional opportunities at ISL, a tuition-based school with a subsequent large budget. While some PD sessions were at the school, most staff went to conferences outside Luxembourg. During my first year, I was able to go to an IT conference in Frankfurt, Germany where many presenters came from other international schools to share what they did with their students. It was fascinating to hear teachers from various countries struggle with many of the same issues. The same year I also went to a brain conference in Lausanne, Switzerland with topics such as neurology, nutrition, learning behaviors, differentiation and stress levels and the effects these have on learning. Once again, hearing from specialists in the field was a fascinating experience with many options for sessions. While in Luxembourg, I also studied French and German.

During my second year, I was able to attend the ECIS conference in Lisbon, Portugal, a very popular conference with amazing keynote speakers and breakout sessions, attended by people from all over the world. The first keynote speaker was Hans Rosling from the medical university in Stockholm. He gave a fascinating presentation about past and contemporary economic, social and environmental changes in the world. The second keynote was Steve Smith, an American astronaut with four space flights. The third keynote was Liv Arnesen who had cross-country skied to many interesting places (Greenland ice cap, South Pole, across part of the Arctic Ocean) and was preparing for an expedition to the South Pole for global awareness about key water issues. Breakout sessions also had a variety of topics. A favorite session was about using iPads in the classroom presented by educators working for Apple. Again, it was interesting to hear a multitude of different perspectives from around the world. The second conference I attended was a Math conference in London, England with a group of early years teachers. We were the only teachers from an international school surrounded by public school teachers. We listened to their struggles, realizing how fortunate we were to be working in an environment with privileged children where money was not a constraint.

Technology at ISL was also a very open environment with fabulous technical support. Teachers were not restricted about content that could be downloaded. As well, communication with both staff and parents was done completely online. For example, school notices for parents and staff were posted online, with the expectation that these were checked throughout the day. File sharing was also the norm. Teachers had grade levels files, picture files, subject files, etc. where they could deposit items that the entire school could access. Once a year, staff could also apply through a technology proposal program to purchase any technical resource that would enhance their teaching and subsequent student learning. With a technology support department on site, imagination was the only thing holding anyone back. On a more personal note, there was an All School notices section where staff could upload items of interest not related to teaching such as local events, news items, jokes, items for sale, musings, questions about where to find something in Luxembourg, etc. It was one way to support and inform each other as an expat community.

Technology at ISL was also distributed in different ways. The Lower School did not have labs. Grades K-2 had 8 desktops computers and the Grades 3-5 had small laptops called Fizzbooks. The computers became an integrated part of the day, with groups of students on the computers while others worked at desks, with a teacher, or did other projects. The Grades K-2 teachers were very skilled at having multiple activities going on at the same time. Overall, students were tech-savvy, becoming quite independent at a young age. Students were also allowed to use cameras to take pictures and create video. As well, iPads were introduced in the K-1 classes to help and inspire the creative process. I left my mark by helping teachers to try moving from desktop computers towards iPads and laptops.

With the teacher librarian side of my role, I had to learn a sophisticated technology system in order to provide assistance to teachers. I also worked towards students becoming familiar with different types of books and how to

find them in the library. Book talks were done based on topics to help students with finding different topics of interest. Even my young K students could tell me the difference between fiction and non-fiction and how books were organized in the picture book section. My professional and personal development in this role was learning the art of diplomacy in developing relationships with teachers. As all teacher librarians know, it takes some legwork to build trust with teachers. Also, in this type of situation, teachers who are 'lifers' see 'immigrants' like me come and go and don't necessarily want to invest in relationship building. Fortunately, with perseverance, and by teaching information skills, guided reading, and technical skills, I was able to build trust. Having left a school where I had been a teacher librarian for six years and then going to a school where I did not have my reputation to follow me, and it was a bit humbling to have to work at selling myself.

So, did my experience change my perspectives as a teacher librarian? Yes and no. My experience has reaffirmed that educators all over the world struggle with the same basic issues (multiple literacy skills, language development, differentiation, and creating confident children) and have a sincere desire to do what is best for their students. My experience has also allowed me to develop a 'Just Do It' mentality. I now realize that if I want to do something, I need to figure out a way to make it happen because if I hesitate, the moment may pass me by. This new mentality applied not only to approaching the Grade 1 teacher about collaborating on a space unit and having her students doing presentation with iPads, but also to deciphering a German train schedule and to making a facial appointment, over the phone, in French. I would have missed so many opportunities if I had not forged ahead, even though sometimes I just wanted to hide in my apartment. Being a TL is a fun, exciting, challenging, frustrating, busy role and not for the faint of heart. But, would any of us want it any other way? ... 'Just Do It'!