

Erasmus Staff mobility from David Yellin Academic College of Education to Karel de Grote University, Antwerp, Belgium February 2019

Feedback Dr. Karen Goldman

The week in Antwerp included visits to a variety of schools as well as meetings with our colleagues at the KdG University. It was a valuable learning experience and reinforced the message that there are many ways to run an education system and in particular, to meet the special educational needs of school students.

The education system that we heard about and saw in the area of Antwerp is slightly ahead of Israel in terms of implementing a policy of inclusion. All teachers are responsible for all children. This is an important message when implementing inclusion and it was interesting to see it being put into practice. But teachers are not left to struggle with the special educational needs of their students on their own. There is a support system both within the school and an external support network. We heard from two different mainstream schools about their systems within the school for supporting teachers to work with special needs. The models were developed by each school to meet their particular needs and were positively evaluated by the staff. There is also an established system for furthering a teachers' training so that they can develop their expertise in working with children with special educational needs.

The graduate programme designed for this purpose was of great interest to me. Although it is called a second Bachelor's degree it was clear from the description that it is very different from the kind of degree programmes we offer even at the Master's level. Students come with a personal agenda, identifying the areas of expertise they wish to develop, and the programme is built in order to achieve the student's aims. This seemed to be a very professional approach to staff development and maintains the student's place as the key agent in his or her development.

Also of interest was that in neither special education or mainstream classrooms are teaching assistants employed. Some classes serving children with more complex disabilities will have the assistance of trainee child care workers, but this emphasizes the important point – that all staff in the classroom have some training and indeed most are professionals. This is in contrast to the special education system here which has come to depend heavily on untrained classroom assistants who are poorly paid. Moreover, teachers in special school classrooms in Belgium seemed to be responsible for class sizes similar to those seen in Israel but for a large amount of

the time are on their own with the class. In mainstream classrooms the classes are smaller than those typically seen in Israel, but also frequently included children with special needs.

This situation begs the question – how do they do it? The classrooms offered an answer. It was clear from the equipment available in all the classrooms, whether special education or mainstream, that the principles of Universal Design were being implemented. Thus all children could benefit from various approaches such as, visual supports, or from equipment to increase or decrease sensory stimulation, and there was no delineation of what is special and what is normal.

A further clue as to how the teachers manage classes on their own was the clear emphasis evident in all the classrooms we observed on the teaching of independence in learning and organizational skills. This is from a very young age as preschool education is funded for children from the age of 2.

These two strategies clearly have an impact on the behaviour of students and it was impressive to see that even in schools for children with challenging behaviour, reactive approaches were used less frequently than proactive ones. Psychiatric medication including stimulants is used relatively infrequently. One other factor which probably helps is the amount of space in most of the schools we visited, which clearly contributes to a decrease in stress levels.

Another point of interest was the role of the speech therapist in the schools. In essence the therapist is responsible for both the development of written and oral language when the child has not succeeded with the methods used in the classroom. Speech therapists were thus working as teachers in the area of reading and are trained for this in their initial training.

I am very glad that I took part in this exchange and look forward to seeing our Belgian colleagues here in Israel.