



Early Childhood Education in France

A Personal Perspective

Bonnie R. Hurless



It's field trip day! Twenty-five three-year-olds and several chaperones are gathering in the classroom at the *école maternelle*. Outside they go, the children paired up, and wait patiently 15 minutes for the bus to arrive. Then it's all aboard for a 45-minute ride to a farm. After a snack of cookies and juice, the group sets off on a long hike on a muddy trail to gather items for a scavenger hunt.

Returning to the farm at 1:00 p.m., the children are ready for lunch. A four-course meal is served, with breaks between courses. The three-year-olds proceed through courses of sliced tomatoes in vinaigrette dressing, Salisbury steak in mushroom sauce, and then are delighted when the chocolate mousse appears.

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Sounds like a field trip day in the United States, doesn't it? Well, no, not quite! Let's look at the differences. This scenario was related to me by a parent who had recently moved to France and enrolled her three-year-old in this *école maternelle* classroom. During the field trip, the American mother shared her thoughts about the children's dining experience with a French adult seated at her table: "In the United States we would give them chicken nuggets, french fries, and carrot sticks and be done with it in 20 minutes." The French grandmother's response was that lunch is a lesson in proper dining etiquette and this behavior is expected of the children and "they darn well knew it" (Pamela Mattox, e-mail communication, January 15, 2003).

What are our expectations for young children in the United States? In terms of developmentally appropriate practices for three-year-olds, how would we regard waiting in line for 15 minutes, going on a scavenger hunt, or engaging in a four-course meal with lots of waiting between courses?

A comparison

As I studied and compared the early care and education system in France to the variety of public system approaches implemented in the United States, I found many of our goals and purposes the same even though practices might be different. Both countries value educational opportunities for all and see them as an equalizing force. Both countries believe in an early education start (Neuman & Peer 2002).

In France the preschools, called *écoles maternelles*, are referred to as "the crown jewel of the country's educational system." "Everything, in sum, starts here," says the minister of education (FAF 1999, xi). There is an "absolute and unquestioned acceptance of the *école maternelle* by the French as something that is part of the inviolable creed and culture" (FAF 1999, 10).



Spending time, as I did, with two French children—a three-year-old and a five-year-old—made clear the universality of young children’s interests. They loved Pokemon, playing, and swimming. Their parents wanted to educate them so that they could enjoy success. Their teachers wanted to prepare them to contribute to society, a shared vision that is embedded in the French culture.

Some of the system differences are due to the fact that France is the size of Texas and the United States encompasses a far greater area with more diverse populations. The French system of funding and operating education programs differs significantly from the U.S. system. In France the central government, through the Ministry of Education, is responsible for educational content as well as for salaries and management of the teaching staff (FAF 1999). In the United States, education is managed at the state level rather than at the national level.

While all differences are important, for this article I have chosen to focus on those issues related directly to classroom teachers. I explore differences between France and the United States in national curriculum, educational expectations, and teacher preparation.

National curriculum

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France has a national curriculum that begins at age two with early childhood programs (nursery) and continues through the remainder of the child’s primary and secondary education experience. It is a seamless approach with very clear expectations. The primary level consists of the *école maternelle* and the *école élémentaire*, which include early childhood programs through age 10. The secondary level consists of *collège* and general, technical, or vocational *lycée* (Exbrayant & Poure 2001).

Daily lessons and activities are determined by a national curriculum, but teachers are given the freedom to creatively implement content in their own individual manner. The overall goal of the national curriculum is to bring out the best in every child (FAF 1999).

This article describes the primary level, which parallels the early childhood years of preschool, kindergarten, and grades 1 through 3 in the United States. Children enter the *école maternelle* in this cycle. The *école maternelle* serves children between two-and-a-half and five years of age. The *école maternelle* begins the child’s state education, but the French see it as a time to continue a focus on the uniqueness of the early childhood years, a time to play and learn through play (Jacobsen 2001a). Discovery and learning the French language are the focus of this cycle.

Everyday experiences in the *école maternelle* are the stepping-stones to more formal learning. Teachers make sure that every lesson or task the children do has a clear educational purpose (Jacobson 2001a). Even at this first level, the school begins to prepare the children to become French citizens. The main purpose of the *école maternelle* is exposing children to and immersing them in the French culture. Academics are a secondary goal (Jacobson 2001b). Regardless of children’s native language, French is the language spoken at the *école maternelle*. As a country, France is beginning to



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experience more population diversity, but because of its strong belief in cultural integration, immersion in French language and culture is practiced at the école maternelle.

Children enter the école élémentaire at age six and continue through age 10. The focus is on studying such fundamentals as reading, composition, mathematics, and discovery of other subjects. All the while, this focus provides the foundation for developing fine motor skills that require practice and concentration.

Basic ideas in many subject competencies are introduced as children progress through the école élémentaire. For instance, in math targeted competencies include quantifying in groups, place value, addition, subtraction with remainders, multiplication, and mental calculation. At the higher levels, children broaden their knowledge of these skills and concepts. All skills build on previous knowledge and lead to the development of higher-level thinking.

Educational expectations

I found that French parents, educators, and society all expect their schools to prepare children for future roles as contributing members of French society. This shared vision seems well established. Families support their schools even though they may be less directly involved compared to U.S. families, due to the utmost trust French parents place in teachers. For example, one child was getting ready to transition to the first level of the école élémentaire, *Course Préparatoire*—CP, as he referred to it. On our visit to the child's home, his mother had him carry in the tray of cookies and coffee cups as practice in carrying his own tray at his new school. He appeared excited and eager to meet the new challenges.

Both children and parents seem to clearly understand the expectations for school behavior. Parents show respect for the authority of the teacher, quite possibly due to France's extensive teacher preparation program as well as the teacher's comprehensive understanding of the curriculum.

What expectations do French teachers and parents have in terms of developmentally appropriate practices? As a result of several American delegations' visits to the schools in France, hosted by the French-American Foundation, educators said they were impressed by the high expectations imparted to children and reflected in their discipline, risk taking, and independence. Visitors observed three-year-olds negotiating obstacle courses, crossing rope bridges, and sitting and listening for long periods of time (FAF 1999).

Visiting delegates to a French school witnessed a dining experience that truly amazed them. They observed three-year-olds serving one another radicchio salad, then using cloth napkins, knives, and forks with ease, and handling real glasses of milk to polish off their bread and chicken (FAF 1999, 5). Dining is such an integral part of the French culture that dining experiences are an important curriculum component. Expectations were apparently consistently met whether children were in the classroom or on a field trip.

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Teacher preparation

The area of teacher preparation was of great interest to me. I met a teacher candidate who had just completed the course work and taken the examinations. She was waiting to see how well she had scored. Scores would determine if and where she would have a job for the following year. This is a common concept in the French education system; scores determine placements in universities as well as in jobs. Early on, French children are aware of the importance of test scores as a determinant of their future success.

From this teacher's experiences, I had an opportunity to learn about the whole teacher preparation program. In France, becoming a teacher is very competitive. All teachers have a bachelor's degree in another field before they begin to study education. Teaching candidates take examinations to be admitted to the teacher preparation program. Once admitted to the university program, teacher candidates complete one year of study and several months of fieldwork to receive the equivalent of a master's degree in the United States. During training they are paid by the government.

Following teacher education, more examinations are required—the most important is the Professional Oral Examination. The exam comprises the oral defense of a thesis paper of about 30 pages written during the year at the university. Each candidate receives three questions, with one hour to prepare a defense. Candidates speak for 20 minutes on their topics. For the teacher with whom I became acquainted, language in elementary school was the topic. All candidates also take a four-hour examination testing their knowledge of the French language and a three-hour exam in math.

The French language exam consists of three sections. The first requires summarizing three books chosen by the committee. The second section asks the candidate to analyze a child's writing sample, and the third section requires evaluating a teacher's manual for the purpose of planning a lesson.

Next, candidates choose the content of the remainder of their examinations. Option 1 entails completing an exam in biology, physics, or history; option 2 involves testing for proficiency in language, art, or music. Content area exams include test questions on theory in addition to practical application. Activities might include evaluating a child's paper on a topic such as volcanoes and also planning an appropriate lesson on the content area.

All candidates pass a swimming exam by swimming 25 meters on their stomachs and another 25 meters on their backs. They then have to demonstrate lifesaving skill by retrieving a mannequin from the water within a specified time frame. Candidates also have to choose an exam in orienteering, basketball, track and field, badminton, or modern dance. My acquaintance took exams in the English language, swimming, and orienteering.

Early childhood teachers complete the same preparation and examinations as do teachers at all other levels. They are viewed as professionals and enjoy the same salary, status, and prestige. Professional development opportunities continue throughout a teacher's career. Thirty-six weeks of paid inservice training over their career lifetimes are one benefit offered to all teachers in the French education system.

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“The French emphasis on quality teachers should be viewed as one of the pillars of a quality preschool system,” comments Karen Scott Hill after her observations as a member of the French-American Foundation delegation visiting French schools (FAF 1999, 27). Augusta Souza Kappner believes that “You have to have very, very skilled teachers to find ways to take a more standardized curriculum and relate it to the needs of individual children” (FAF 1999, 15). The French teacher preparation program seems to ensure such quality and skill in its future teachers.

Conclusions

France and the United States do indeed share similar goals and beliefs. Both want their children to be successful, contributing members of society. What differ are the approaches and the systems of public education (Neuman & Peer 2002). The differing approaches are most apparent in our insights into curriculum and teacher preparation. Because of the similarity of goals and beliefs, education expectations are not that different. Let’s look at what is happening in the United States in regard to early childhood curriculum and teacher preparation.

In the United States the standards movement seems in some ways to be a move toward a more coherent curriculum. Thirty-nine states had or were developing early learning standards, according to a study conducted in 2002 (Kagan, Scott-Fellow, & Frelow 2003). Many states have developed early learning standards directly connected to the K–12 standards. This is a beginning of a seamless education approach. Positive outcomes from these early learning standards can include intentional pedagogy, exciting curriculum, concrete reporting to families, enriched teacher education, and effective program evaluation if the standards are developed and used appropriately (Kagan, Scott-Fellow, & Frelow 2003, 58).

What impact will the standards movement have on teacher preparation? The development of standards has had some impact on teacher preparation programs, but the degree varies from state to state. In terms of validating our future teachers’ preparation, 47 states and the District of Columbia require some form of testing (NCES 2002).

In Illinois, teacher candidates take three separate examinations before qualifying for state certification. These tests appear to parallel one component of France’s evaluation system; however, teacher candidates do not have an opportunity to demonstrate practical applications of their new theoretical knowledge. Sixteen states require an assessment of teaching performance (NCES 2002). In France as well as in many states, proving in-depth knowledge in certain content areas is most apparent at the secondary level, where teacher candidates are required to take subject matter tests for certification.

When studying about education in other countries, we often come away feeling that another country has the perfect system. But educational systems, cultures, and governments vary greatly. The French system of universal availability, consistent quality, rigorous teacher training, and streamlined funding and governance may have limited application in the United States (FAF 1999, xii).

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“France does offer a clear view of what is possible” (FAF 1999, ix). Those possibilities make it an exciting and challenging time to be involved in early care and education in the United States. We do want to bring out the best in every child. Let’s look to those possibilities!

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