

Le Tour de France

In education, as in most other things, the French have their own way of doing things.
By Angie Power

I have lived in France for 11 years and, as the mother of two young sons, I find there is a lot to admire in the French primary school system.

From the start, French children are taught joined-up writing. On the first day at primary school, teachers begin with the letter 'a', and the children copy it out time and time again on their slates or white boards until every stroke and shape is correct. Day 2 will be the letter 'b' and so on, until day 26 and the letter 'z'.

French children write on squared paper that resembles our graph paper. The curves and stems of every letter start and finish at precise points in the square. That explains why everyone's handwriting is so similar in France.

Rigorous and repetitious rote learning is a feature of French arithmetic teaching too. By the time a child is eight, he usually knows all the multiplication tables. My son answered 10 questions every morning in class to the beat of a metronome. "Five times eight" — tick; "nine times nine" — tick; "six times nine" — tick; and so on, the children writing the answers down on the tick.

Initially, I was horrified at the stress he was being put under, but he seemed to take it in his stride. As he got better, he actually looked forward to the lessons.

By the end of the year, it was "five times eight plus nine times seven" — tick; "three times six plus nine times nine" — tick. Traditional mental arithmetic has always been regarded as important and there has never been any question of calculators in primary schools.

So much is achieved in French primary schools because parents play an important part. Every child has a cahier de textes — a homework book for parents to see and sign. There is no written homework at this age, but lots of learning by heart must be done at home — verbs, poems, historical facts, even La Marseillaise.

I do not know any parent who does not take schoolwork seriously. They always know what their children have been studying and are encouraged to work on any weak spots.

**Third International Math Study
Grade 8 — 1996**

Country	Overall % Correct
Singapore	79
Japan	73
Korea	72
Hong Kong	70
Belgium (Fl)*	66
Czech Republic	66
British Columbia	63
Slovak Republic	62
Switzerland*	62
Austria**	62
Hungary	62
France	61
Slovenia**	61
Alberta	61
Russian Federation	60
Netherlands**	60
Bulgaria**	60
Canada	59
Ireland	59
Belgium (Fr)**	59
Australia**	58
Thailand**	57
Israel**	57
Newfoundland	56
Sweden	56
New Brunswick (ESS)	54
Ontario	54
Germany**	54
New Zealand	54
Norway	54
England*	53
United States*	53
Denmark**	52
Scotland**	52
Latvia (LSS)*	51
Spain	51
Iceland	50
Greece**	49
Romania**	49
Lithuania*	48
Cyprus	48
Portugal	43
Iran, Islamic Republic	38
Kuwait**	30
Colombia**	29
South Africa**	24

*Replacement schools used, or less than the whole population sampled.

**Did not meet all sampling requirements.

French teachers believe in tests. My sons have small tests once a week and more detailed ones (controles) about every two months. A mother knows by heart what her child's average mark is and where he comes in the class.

If his test performance is poor, a child will stay in the same form for a second year. Although this is done only by agreement, it is surprising how many parents are keen on redoublement. My sons have had children in their classes who were two years older than the rest because they had not gone up a form with their peers.

Primary school teaching revolves around a national curriculum. If your child moves school to the other side of France, the new school will be doing exactly the same program.

My children are used to speaking in public because they do a lot of recitation at school. After learning a poem at home, they recite it to the class the next day. They learn a paragraph on the Gauls or the solar system and recite it to the whole class.

I used to shrink at the idea of my son standing at the front on his teacher's platform with the children facing him in rows. Then French mothers explained that they believed recitation improves a child's memory. I certainly think it can give a child confidence.

Teaching a foreign language — usually English — begins at the age of nine at the latest, when an hour and a half a week is compulsory. The emphasis on oral work and basic vocabulary, and includes memorized forms of how to introduce yourself and give your personal details.

The aim is not formally to teach a foreign language but to accustom the children to hearing and saying unfamiliar words and sounds. By the time they start their secondary education at 11, when formal foreign language lessons begin, they are used to participating verbally.

There is much to admire in the French system. It is good to swap notes, don't you think?

(Reprinted with permission from the Daily Telegraph, July 5, 2000)