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## Cultural Commentary: Thinking About Education: French and American Primary Schools

Barbara Apstein  
*Bridgewater State College*

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achievement than do their public school counterparts; and importantly, the achievement gap gradually increases from the sophomore to the senior year so that private school students are approximately two grade levels ahead of public school students at the time of graduation. Moreover, Catholic high schools are much more effective in significantly increasing the achievement levels of minority students than are either public schools or non-Catholic private schools.

There are, Coleman argues, two major factors affecting high school achievement and the concomitant differences between public and private high schools: the existing levels of discipline and academic demands. Both are significantly higher in private as opposed to most public schools and, in a sense, cause high achievement. It is not the private nature of the school *per se* that is significant, but the ability and willingness of the private school to include these factors.

Since these two factors appear to be the primary causes of high achievement, it is suggested that the remedy for the rather poor showing of most public high schools is to increase both the academic demands and the discipline levels of the schools. Public high schools must reverse the trend of the 1970s which included the development of student-defined curriculum, a de-emphasis of the traditional curriculum, liberalized grading, and the blurring of the distinction between discrimination on the basis of race and discrimination on the basis of performance. Such academic changes could be implemented fairly well by the schools themselves, assisted perhaps by colleges reaffirming traditional, more rigorous admissions standards. Improving discipline, however, is another matter. Full civil rights for students, state and federal policies and laws (such as Public Law 94-142 which reduces school discretion in coping with emotionally disturbed children), and family circumstances frequently militate against the introduction of sound disciplinary policies.

Already a controversial book, *High School Achievement* draws conclusions that should not be uncritically embraced or rejected by those who are predisposed to do so. The arguments are complex and require careful reading and analysis. But the effort should result in a clearer and more informed understanding of the factors affecting academic achievement at the high school level.

By Robert E. Fitzgibbons  
Raymond J. ZuWallack  
Department of High School  
Middle School and Adult Education

## CULTURAL COMMENTARY

### Thinking About Education: French and American Primary Schools

By Barbara Apstein

Despite persistent reports of the "Americanization" of France, and the French success of American cultural exports as diverse as Jerry Lewis, fast food, E.T., and the Sony Walkman, France retains its distinctive traditions in many less visible but more significant ways. A six month sabbatical last spring gave our family a chance to compare French primary schools with our own, and in the process to examine some of our assumptions about the education of young children. About a week after our arrival in Boulogne-Billancourt, a middle-class suburb west of Paris, we enrolled our children, Daniel and Andrew, then aged 7 and 3, in the local public school.

What impressed us first was the school's serious and business-like atmosphere. The school building, situated in the middle of a city block, might have been mistaken for a large apartment house, were it not for the signs engraved above its three entrances: Ecole des Filles, Ecole des Garçons, Ecole Maternelle (Girls' School, Boys' School, Nursery School). These entrances, we soon discovered, are open between the hours of 8:15 and 8:45 a.m., at lunchtime, and finally at 4:00, when the children are dismissed. Otherwise they are locked and, as in a city apartment building, anyone who wants to be admitted has to ring for the concierge or superintendent. As Americans accustomed

American teachers had always welcomed my offers of assistance. But the suggestion perplexed his teacher, Madame Rousseau, a cheerful young woman in her 20s, who clearly had never heard of such an idea before. She didn't see anything wrong with my offer to help, but would have to ask permission of the Principal, Madame Chaput. About a week later, I was informed of Madame Chaput's unequivocal "non": parents are permitted to visit, she said, on a special "Portes Ouvertes" (open house) day, which she had not yet organized (and as far as I know, never did). She further explained that if she let me visit a class, then everybody would want to, indicating with a flurry of arm waving the appalling chaos that was likely to ensue.

Although we resented these restrictions at first, after a few months we began to see that this insistence on privacy has a certain logic. Since school is considered to be a kind of business, what goes on in the classroom seems no more a matter for public scrutiny than what goes on in a doctor's examination room or an accountant's office. This businesslike atmosphere is reflected in the order and seriousness of the French classroom. Children don't get up and wander around or chatter with one another, as frequently happens in our American second grade classroom, and undoubtedly

far less time is wasted in reasoning with refractory youngsters.

Equally alien to the French is the American idea of the school as a center of community activity. The École Communale de la Ville de Boulogne-Billancourt has neither t-shirts, sweaters, nor bookbags emblazoned with its emblem: it hawks no bumper stickers and finances no school teams; it

to a building always open during school hours, a bright "Welcome" sign over the entrance and a general "Come in and get acquainted" atmosphere, we were somewhat taken aback.

The school's insistence on maintaining its privacy extended further. One of the projects I had planned was to spend one morning a week as an aide in Daniel's classroom. His

#### exercices de lecture





has no weekly newsletter, no yearly pumpkin sale; no spring fair or fall picnic; no P.T.A. The Ecole Communale raises money by sending an envelope home with each child once a month; the family is expected to make some contribution appropriate to its income. Nor are the French schools expected to solve the problems of society as a whole. Busing to promote integration does not exist. Nor, I think, would it occur to a French parent to request that his child's teacher conduct a special discussion of the problems of divorce in class, as a parent in our American school recently did.



French schools do, however, take more responsibility for modeling and guiding the child's behavior than ours. Daniel's report card, in addition to grades for reading, spelling, math, French and writing, listed grades for "Comportement" (behavior) and "Soin." The dictionary translates "Soin" as "Care" or "Attention to," but in the report card context it means something like "neatness and personal hygiene" -- keeping your

accurately by my son as "a square salami with freckles"), baked chicken in a cream sauce with green beans, bread and cheese, and a piece of cake. This feast is served by waitresses on real dishes - there are no styrofoam cups, paper plates, or cardboard trays. The children have assigned places at long tables, and each table is headed by a teacher or by the Principal, who ensure appropriate behavior.

The contrast with the lunch period at an American school is striking. For American children, lunch is a time to relax and release pent-up energies. Their teacher leaves the classroom and is replaced by a monitor, whose function seems to be to keep the chaos within safe limits. Peanut butter sandwiches are unceremoniously devoured, half-eaten apples thrown away, and after a few minutes all but a few children have run off to the playground.

The French emphasis on quality food and dining etiquette extends to the nursery school level. I was skeptical of three-year-old Andrews's report that soup was served at his *ecole maternelle*, until one day I glimpsed twenty-five two and three year olds seated quietly around a low table, waiting to be served onion soup in glass bowls. The other three standard courses were, of course, to follow.

Obviously, the midday meal is not regarded as a mere biological necessity for these children. Learning to eat neatly and to finish all the food on their plates is as much a part of their formal education as reading and writing are. In twenty years, these children will know, in the same way they know their own language, that a sandwich devoured at a desk between telephone calls does not

books and papers in order, your pencils sharpened, your fingernails clean, and using a handkerchief rather than a sleeve to wipe your nose. My seven year old, not surprisingly, received a C in this subject (and even so, I think Madame Rousseau was being charitable), since we Americans tend to view these matters more lackadaisically -- we explain the rules, show our children how to clean their nails and wipe their noses, and feel sure that some day they will learn to do it properly themselves.

In our American school, children don't begin receiving grades until they are about ten years old. Until then, their work is "marked" with a smiling face, a star, or a whale-shaped sticker bearing the phrase "you did a whale of a job." The evaluations parents receive during the semi-annual conferences are usually reassuringly vague, with an emphasis on "interpersonal relations" and "learning style." Although this democratic, non-judgmental approach doubtless helps children to develop a positive self-image, Americans often have only hints to help them in assessing their true academic strengths and weaknesses. Even entering college, some of our students have such inflated ideas of their own abilities that they are invariably disappointed and resentful when their work is evaluated honestly.

The French sense of responsibility for modelling children's behavior is most striking at mealtimes. Those who eat lunch at school are served a four-course meal (no lunch boxes are permitted). A typical menu might include *pâté* (described quite



Daniel Apstein (second from left, with striped shirt) in his French Classroom

constitute a real lunch, that a real lunch is a one-and-a-half-hour event with an unhurried, thoroughly predictable rhythm of its own.

By the end of our visit, we had found a number of things to admire in the French primary school: the serious classroom atmosphere and clear sense of purpose, the conscientious effort devoted to modelling children's behavior -- all qualities which reflect the conservatism and order of French life. But we also came to appreciate our American educational system, with its openness and its concern with children's emotional development as well as their intellectual progress. Relaxed and flexible, sometimes appallingly eager to change methods and philosophy in order to please their constituency, our schools mirror both the best and worst aspects of our restless society.

Barbara Apstein  
Assistant Professor of English