École Maternelle du Port

by Michael Kalinowski

In France, an école maternelle, which serves primarily children aged three to five, is generally divided into three sections: Petite (3-4 years), Moyenne (4-5), and Grande (5-6). There are typically 24 to 30 children per class, each of which has one Maîtresse (female teacher) or Maître (male teacher) and generally an Aide Maternelle (aide). A facility also has kitchen staff and may have a secretary. Early childhood programs share a visiting psychologist, specialized teachers for children with problems, and a nurse and doctor. The director and the teachers are French civil servants and paid by the Ministry of Education. Others are paid by the Town Hall. School buildings are owned by the cities that are responsible for all costs and building maintenance.

The École Maternelle (EM) du Port in Nice has 136 children this year, divided into five classes. In France, directors also work as teachers, often spending fours days per week in the classroom and only one day managing the program. Programs operate six hours per day, four days a week. Parents pay only for meals and before/after school care. Director Valérie Coupard notes, “With the significant number of pupils, I often organize my class like in primary school. Pupils work in small workgroups of 6 to 8 children. Two groups work by themselves on free activities, one group works with the aide, and the last group works with the teacher on new notions/concepts. We must occasionally ask children to be quiet and sit down; it is sometimes difficult for the teacher to teach one group and at the same time manage the overall class.”

French education is centralized with a nationwide curriculum imposed by the Ministry of Education that ensures national uniformity and is regularly updated based on research and governmental priorities. The current national curriculum was updated on June 19, 2008. Teachers must follow the curriculum, but can decide what is the best way to implement it, a practice termed liberté pédagogique.

Although in France school is mandatory from age 6 through 16, nursery school is highly recommended as a strict correlation between nursery school attendance and the quality of future school achievements is assumed.
The primary objectives for French nursery schools are:

- Socialization
- First experience of living away from home
- Learning new concepts like sharing, waiting, dealing with frustration
- Oral/written language development, preliminary access to decoding, reading
- Body movement development
- Learning how to copy a line in cursive and at the end of nursery school knowing how to write in cursive
- Concepts of time, space, and geometry
- First steps towards the digital system

One significant difference between French and American early programs is the French emphasis on art. In France children learn technique, try to copy French masterpieces, and generally produce much more complicated art projects than children in American programs, including large group murals.

Madame Coupard described a reading challenge last year: “Teachers chose five books that they considered interesting for their pictures, design, or writing. Books were studied in the classes. For each book we built a summary together with the children to answer some questions. We also scanned some of the pictures. Questions included:

- Where is the action happening, what are the different locations?
- Who is the hero?
- Which are the objects mentioned in the story? Which are objects mentioned at the end of the story?

“These four questions were very easy, but helped children to understand and memorize the story. At the end of the five books, children voted for their favorite. The selected book was then used for graphic art activities.

“In my class, we cut some paper using Matisse’s style and then used it to create a big poster. This type of work helps in developing an initial literary culture, gives each child the opportunity to express himself, and helps children have a more open mind in regard to culture. The project will be repeated this year. At Christmas, Paddington Bear will come to the school and bring us some bear stories.”

This is an exceptional program, renowned for its staff team spirit, for its approach to developing a deep love of literature in young children, and for its approach to utilizing artistic techniques to help prepare children to write. The author often takes his university students here on his Spring Break visits to Nice and the surrounding area as part of his course on Early Childhood in Southern France.

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The Program Showcases were developed by Michael Kalinowski as a component of the World Forum on Early Care and Education.

They are intended to highlight the work of particularly interesting, unique, and/or exceptional early childhood programs around the world.

Selected programs will appear in future issues of Exchange, and are also available on www.ChildCareExchange.com.