AMERICAN AND FRENCH SCHOOL SYSTEMS COMPARED: A SEARCH FOR THE IDEAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

Students know no other schooling system than the one which they attend. As a result, they conflate the concept of "education" with their own experience. They do not learn from the school systems of other countries. With only this limited understanding of what education is and can be, students cannot think critically about their own education. Educators, psychologists, and policy makers find themselves in a similar situation. Seeking to expand this restricted view of education, I compare and contrast the American and French systems of education using my own experiences in the American classroom.

Introduction

Educators, psychologists, and policy makers are always searching for the way to provide students with the "best" education. They engage in research, consult with teachers, and review standardized test results. But they often forget to look beyond their own countries' borders. As a senior in high school, I have been thinking about what education would be "best" for me. I decided to compare and contrast the American and French systems of education to learn from both and to gain a better understanding of the role of education itself. In this article, I examine American and French teaching methods, learning objectives, and the curricula of both systems and their impact on students' intellectual development from age two to eighteen. Because the American system of education varies from state to state, I use the most common student

experience as evidence. I explore the two systems of education as affects the student—the scope of this article does not extend to political or national implications of the school system. I explain the functioning of each school system for context before discussing the student experience (including my own).

Ages Two to Five
Preschool and « l'école maternelle »

The American and French systems of education share the key early childhood objective of learning through play; however, the two systems differ in their understanding of "play."

American **preschool** refers to one to three optional years of early childhood education, and varies from state to state. Children may enroll in preschool from the ages of two to five. The last year of preschool is referred to as Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K). Children in Pre-K are generally four or five years old. In the French system, « **l'école maternelle** » refers to the three compulsory years of early childhood education (*Organisation de l'école*, n.d.). Children enroll in « la petite section » at the age of three, « la moyenne section » at the age of four, and « la grande section » at the age of five.

Both American preschool and French « l'école maternelle » aim to prepare students for success in later years of education. Both teach children to socialize with teachers and other children, and to develop basic speaking, writing, and number skills (Yoshikawa et al., 2013 and *L'école maternelle*, 2020). Most importantly, both seek to inspire children to want to go to school.

In the United States, more so than in France, the main method of teaching young children is encouraging learning through play (*Play-Based Learning at IPS*, n.d.). Children take an active

role in their learning through hands-on experiments and observation. Teachers do not pour knowledge into a child's mind; children absorb knowledge from their surroundings like sponges. This method is most engaging because it follows the child's natural impulses to question, to explore, and to discover.

In my preschool classrooms, I remember watching a plant grow from a seed, looking at feathers through a magnifying glass, and finger painting. In the classrooms of « l'école maternelle, » children learn how to recount memories aloud, play a simple board game in a group, and express themselves through dance.

While both systems follow **play-based learning** models, the French method approaches "play" in a more literal sense than the American method. "Play" in the French system refers specifically to toys, physical activity, and arts and crafts. (*Programmes et horaires à l'école maternelle*, 2020). In the United States, learning through play happens in a much broader scope: just as children can learn through playing with blocks or on a playground, so too can they learn through playing with a mirror, a latex glove, or even a puddle.

Ages Six to Ten
Elementary School and « l'école élémentaire »

The divergence between the American and French systems of education widens in the second division of schooling: elementary school in the United States and « l'école élémentaire » in France. The two systems teach core subjects (national language, Social Studies, Math, and Science) similarly, but differ significantly when it comes to courses outside the core subjects.

American **elementary school** refers to five or six compulsory years of schooling. Children generally attend **Kindergarten** at the age of five or six, **First** (1st) **Grade** at the age of

six or seven, **Second** (2nd) **Grade** at the age of seven or eight, **Third** (3rd) **Grade** at the age of eight or nine, **Fourth** (4th) **Grade** at the age of nine or ten, and **Fifth** (5th) **Grade**, at the age of ten or eleven. In American public schools, Fifth Grade is also part of elementary school; in independent schools, it is generally the first year of middle school. In the French system, « **l'école élémentaire** » refers to the five compulsory years of schooling following « l'école maternelle » (*Organisation de l'école*, n.d.). Children enroll in « **Cours préparatoire** » (CP) at the age of six and « **Cours élémentaire première année** » (CE1) at the age of seven, and « **Cours élémentaire deuxième année** » (CE2) at the age of eight, « **Cours moyen première année** » (CM1) at the age of nine, and « **Cours moyen deuxième année** » (CM2) at the age of ten.

Both elementary school and « l'école élémentaire » teach young students to develop a written and oral command of the national language. For example, elementary school students in both systems read books, short articles, and cartoons appropriate for their age (*Common Core Standards Initiative*, 2021 & *Programmes et horaires à l'école élémentaire*, 2020). They learn to categorize stories into genres based on literary tone. In addition to listening to the teacher read to them, elementary school students also read aloud to practice their reading and speaking skills and to build their confidence. They also learn to guess the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary words using context, to familiarize themselves with spelling patterns, and to memorize irregular verbs.

Both the American and French systems also encourage young students to ask questions and use their voice (*Common Core Standards Initiative*, 2021 & *Programmes et horaires à l'école élémentaire*, 2020). My Kindergarten teacher worked throughout the year to teach the class the difference between a question and a comment, and to make sure that students used them

at the appropriate times. In both systems of education, students learn to speak appropriately in different contexts: they introduce themselves, tell stories, describe their surroundings, explain their opinions, and even restate their comments when misunderstood.

Learning objectives are not the only overlap between the programs offered in American elementary schools and French « écoles élémentaires. » In the United States, most elementary school students study English, Social Studies, Math, Science, Physical Education, Art, Music, and sometimes even Technology (*Common Core Standards Initiative*, 2021). Likewise, students in France's « l'école élémentaire » study French, History and Geography, Math, Science and Technology, Physical Education, Art, and Music (*Programmes et horaires à l'école élémentaire*, 2020).

There are, however, certain key curricular differences between elementary school and « l'école élémentaire » — « l'école élémentaire » teaches subjects not taught to most American students until high school or even college. First, beginning in « Cours préparatoire, » French students study a second living language, foreign or regional (*Programmes et horaires à l'école élémentaire*, 2020). This language study not only builds language skills, but also helps students understand how to communicate in various situations while exposing them to other cultures and lifestyles. Second, from CE1 (age seven) to CM2 (age ten), French students also study History of the Arts. Students learn to offer an interpretation of the meaning of a piece of art, identify key characteristics and elements of style, and find their way around a museum. As a result, French students develop their « **culture générale** » —a French term meaning "general culture" that refers to knowledge of the finest of human accomplishments, including visual art, literature, film, theater, and scientific discoveries. Third, throughout « l'école élémentaire, » students take a

course called « **l'enseignement morale et civique**, » which translates to "Moral and Civic Instruction." Americans who have looked at the course title in disbelief can let out their breath: at the level of « l'école élémentaire, » the course focuses on cooperation, decision-making, and empathy. American elementary schools teach these social-emotional skills, too, but usually these lessons are integrated into everyday school life, rather than in a class dedicated exclusively to them.

Ages Eleven to Fourteen
Middle School and « le collège »

In middle school and « le collège, » the American and French systems of education share many approaches to teaching language and literature. However, the French system is more comparative and interdisciplinary and has a wider global reach than the American system with the objective of enhancing the cultural competence of French students.

American **middle school** refers to three to four compulsory years of schooling following elementary school. Children begin **Sixth** (6th) **Grade** at the age of eleven or twelve, **Seventh** (7th) **Grade** at the age of twelve or thirteen, and **Eight** (8th) **Grade** at the age of thirteen or fourteen. In independent schools, students enter middle school in **Fifth** (5th) **Grade** at the age of ten or eleven. In the French system, « **le collège** » refers to the four compulsory years of schooling following « l'école élémentaire » (*Organisation de l'école*, n.d.). In the French « collège » —not to be confused with American "college"—children enroll in « **sixième** » (6e) at the age of eleven, « **cinquième** » (5e) at the age of twelve, « **quatrième** » (4e) at the age of thirteen, and « **troisième** » (3e) at the age of fourteen. At the end of « **troisième**, **»** French students must take a series of examinations and evaluations called the « **diplôme national du**

brevet des collèges » (DNB) (*Le diplôme national du brevet*, 2021). There is no equivalent in the American system.

By the end of middle school or « le collège, » American and French students should be able to use and understand the national language precisely and correctly (*Common Core Standards Initiative*, 2021 & *Les programmes du collège*, 2020). They should also be able to adapt the register of their voice, in speech and writing, to the situation. For example, both American and French students learn to avoid slang and informal words in academic writing.

In addition to using language properly and efficiently, students in both systems develop critical reading, writing, and thinking skills (*Common Core Standards Initiative*, 2021 & *Les programmes du collège*, 2020). In my fifth grade Social Studies class, for example, I learned to evaluate sources for research: is this a reliable website? was the source commissioned by an organization? does the author present both sides of a debate objectively? Both systems of education ensure that students start research around the age of eleven, because research requires students to develop several academic skills: gathering information, assessing the reliability of that information, crafting and supporting arguments, and organizing their thoughts.

Both American middle school and French « le collège » train students to understand great literature. Both systems place an emphasis on the context of a work of literature. However, American middle school education emphasizes the historical and geographical contexts of a work, whereas French « le collège » emphasizes literary and artistic contexts. For example, when I read *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, my fifth grade English teacher made sure that we could situate the novel in its specific historical and geographical contexts: the Great Depression in the American South. The French system teaches a comparative approach to understanding literature,

encouraging students to evaluate a work of great literature with other works of literature, as well as cinematic or artistic works from France and other countries (*Les programmes du collège*, 2020).

Having given students a deeper appreciation of great literature in context, both the American and French systems of education teach students to use literature as a model for their own writing. I remember reading folktales in my sixth grade English class, and then writing my own folktale in the style of those that I had just read. Both American and French students learn to recognize and understand literary devices such as similes and metaphors (*Common Core Standards Initiative*, 2021 & *Les programmes du collège*, 2020). After gaining a full understanding of rhetorical devices, students are expected to use them to enhance their own writing.

The curricular differences between elementary school and « l'école élémentaire » become less pronounced for students at ages eleven to fourteen. While many American students learn a second living language in middle school, French students study two languages simultaneously during « le collège » (*Les programmes du collège*, 2020). As a result, French students gain knowledge of more cultures and are able to see how different cultural groups communicate and interact with one another. Another way the French education system enhances intercultural studies is through the Geography curriculum. In the United States, students may take one class in geography; often, geography is not a separate class. In France, Geography is taught in themes: in « quatrième, » for example, students study global urbanization, transnational human movement, and the transformation of space through globalization. The Geography curriculum is global by

nature: within these themes, students learn about France, the United States, Africa, and borderlands and bodies of water all across the globe.

In « le collège, » History of the Arts is an interdisciplinary course: it is integrated into the curricula of French, second- and third-language instruction, History and Geography, Visual Arts, and Music (*Les programmes du collège*, 2020). Students learn to situate art in its specific contexts and analyze it as an artifact of history, geography, and culture. When I was in middle school, I rarely discussed History of the Arts in my History classes, and never discussed it in other courses—including Visual Arts, which was focused instead on artistic technique.
« L'enseignement moral et civique » during « le collège » is aligned with France's values, rather than universal ones (such as kindness) taught in the course during « l'école élémentaire » (*Les programmes du collège*, 2020). Now that students can read historical documents and understand abstract ideas, the French system of education exposes them to the founding values of the French Republic, including freedom, equality, the complete separation of church and state, respect, and justice. While American middle school students often read documents important to the history of the United States (such as the U.S. Constitution), in my experience, those texts are given limited special attention: for the most part, they are taught like any other historical document.

Another key difference between the American and French education systems is standardized testing, such as France's « diplôme national du brevet des collèges » (DNB). Some, but not all, states in the United States administer examinations at age fourteen. The DNB examination evaluates the knowledge and skills a student learns in « le collège, » particularly the « **socle commun de connaissances, de compétences et de culture**. » (*Le socle commun de connaissances, de compétences et de culture*, 2021). The « socle » encompasses the knowledge,

skills, values, and attitudes necessary to succeed in school, individual life, and as a future citizen. It is divided into five domains: (1) Languages for Thinking and Communication; (2) Learning Methods and Tools; (3) Formation of a Person and Citizen; (4) Natural and Technical Systems (which focuses on Math, Science, and Technology); and (5) Representations of the World and Human Activity. The domain of Languages for Thinking and Communication is subdivided into four sections: (1) French; (2) a foreign or regional language; (3) the language of math, science, and technology; and (4) the language of arts and the human body.

Graded out of 800 points, the DNB is made up of a teacher assessment and standard examinations (*Le diplôme national du brevet*, 2021). At the end of « troisième, » the teacher evaluates a student's mastery of the « socle » out of 400 points; final testing encompasses the remaining 400 points. Students may choose to be evaluated for competency in a language, regional or ancient, for a maximum of 20 bonus points.

The final examination is made up of five tests or « épreuves » (*Le diplôme national du brevet*, 2021). The first test, which students may take as early as April of their year in « troisième, » is an Oral Examination (100 points), a test method with which most American middle school students are not familiar. As a senior in high school, I have taken only one examination with an oral component: the DALF (« Diplôme approfondi de langue française ») C1 examination of fluency in French, offered by the French Ministry of Education. During the oral portion of the DNB, students make a presentation, usually in History of the Arts, and are interviewed by teachers. Student may opt for a one-on-one or group interview: in a one-on-one interview, students present for 5 minutes and are interviewed for 10 minutes; in a group interview, students present for 10 minutes and are interviewed for 15 minutes.

Students take the other four « épreuves, » which are all written tests, at the end of June of « troisième » (*Le diplôme national du brevet*, 2021). The first of the written tests is French (3 hours, 100 points), in which students must explain a literary text and perhaps an image and complete a redaction exercise, among other tasks. Evaluators award points on the basis of language, and interpretation and explanation skills. The second test is Math (2 hours, 100 points), in which students solve math problems, some involving interpreting a table or graph, and a Computer Science exercise. The third test is History and Geography and Moral and Civic Instruction (2 hours, 50 points), in which students analyze documents and maps. The fourth test is Sciences (2 hours, 50 points), which is divided into two one-hour parts. Students choose two out of three sciences: physics and chemistry, earth and life sciences, and technology.

Ages Fifteen to Eighteen
High School and « le lycée »

There are many differences between the American and French systems of education when it comes to students ages fifteen to eighteen. First and foremost, the French system has multiple branches of high school, and multiple options for students to specialize their studies at that level. For purposes of comparing American high school and French « lycée, » I will use my own experience as an American student and follow the experience of a French student taking the "general path" of studies in a "general high school" (two specific terms I will explain below).

American **high school** refers to four years of schooling following eighth grade. Children begin **Ninth** (9th) **Grade** at the age of fourteen or fifteen, **Tenth** (10th) **Grade** at the age of fifteen or sixteen, **Eleventh** (11th) **Grade** at the age of sixteen or seventeen, and **Twelfth** (12th)

Grade at the age of seventeen or eighteen. In the French system, « **le lycée** » refers to the three years of schooling following « le collège » (*Organisation de l'école*, n.d.). Children enroll in « **seconde** » (2de) at the age of fifteen, « **première** » (1re) at the age of sixteen, and « **terminale** » (Tle) at the age of seventeen. At the end of « **terminale**, **»** French students take an examination called the « **baccalauréat** » (the « bac ») (Barthe, 2016). There is no equivalent in the American education system.

The first significant difference between the American and French education systems is that, after « le collège, » French students can choose to enroll in either a « **lycée d'enseignement général et technologique** » (LEGT), a general and technology high school, or a « **lycée professionnel**, » a professional high school (*Le lycée*, 2020). In LEGT, students can take one of two paths. Students on either path take the same classes in « seconde; » their academic courses differ in « première » and « terminale. » The first path, the « **voie générale** » (general path), prepares students to take the « **baccalauréat général** » (general baccalaureate) and study at universities and other specialized schools. The second path, the « **voie technologique** » (technology path), prepares students to take the « **baccalauréat technologique** » (technology baccalaureate) and encompasses eight sectors, ranging from laboratory sciences to agronomy to dance and music. There is also the « lycée professionnel, » which prepares students to obtain either a « **baccalauréat professionnel** » (professional baccalaureat) or a « **certificat d'aptitude professionnel** » (CAP) by allocating 40 to 60% of a student's time to professional and technical studies; the remaining 40 to 60% is spent on core subjects.

American high school and both French « lycées » aim to develop students' skills in literary analysis, argumentation, and reflection (*Common Core Standards Initiative*, 2021 & *Le lycée*, 2020). As a high school student, I have written many essays analyzing the effect of an author's rhetorical choices on my interpretation of a text. My teachers, like their French colleagues, require that I cite textual evidence to support my arguments. My reflections at school usually stem from a question or issue raised in a text that I can apply to my life today; for example, at the conclusion of an essay I wrote on crowns and power in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, I connected American ideals about power to Shakespeare's moral lesson. French students my age would approach 'reflection' from a more philosophical perspective.

In « terminale, » all French students take a course in philosophy (Barthe, 2016)—a subject which most American students do not study, even in college. The philosophy course, which aims to develop students' critical judgment, includes a study of the great philosophers, and an examination of seventeen concepts, including art, justice, nature, language, freedom, religion, the State, truth, and happiness (*Programmes et ressources en philosophie*, 2021). Students learn to understand and explain philosophical texts and produce written and oral reflections on a specific philosophical question.

Another way that the French education system teaches students to organize and support arguments is through the « lycée » program of « Enseignement moral et civique » (*Programme d'enseignement moral et civique*, 2015). In Moral and Civic Instruction, students learn to debate, one-on-one and in groups, while respecting the opinions of others. Students also complete a research project each year, which involves locating, contextualizing, reading, and analyzing documents to formulate their argument.

While the Philosophy, and Moral and Civic Instruction courses give students a basis for thinking critically and responsibly, the new French program of specialties teaches students to think deeply. Starting in 2021, the French system of education requires students to specialize within their chosen path at the end of « seconde » (*Quels sont les enseignements de spécialité ?*, n.d.). They choose three specialties to study in « première, » two of which they continue studying during « terminale. » There are many specialties offered. For example, within only the « voie générale, » there are thirteen choices of specialty, including Humanities, Literature, and Philosophy, Computer Science, Biology and Ecology, and Physical Education and Sports Culture and Practices. All these specialties aim to further the goal of the French education system to offer students a « diversité de formation » (variety of schooling options) to enable them to deepen their knowledge in the subjects they are most passionate about and make their learning most useful for their future.

Specialization has its advantages. It allows students to study what they love and love what they study. If I were a French student, I would always be excited to go to school because every class would be my favorite class. The specialization also allows students to make the most of their limited time in school. For example, those who know they want to pursue a career in the sciences have time to dive deep into their subject of choice because they do not have to attend Latin classes. Students pursuing the « voie générale » still receive a well-rounded education: in addition to their specialties, they all study French, History, Geography, Moral and Civic Instruction, two living languages, Philosophy, Science and Technology, and Physical Education (*Quels sont les enseignements de spécialité ?*, n.d.).

Specialization also has its disadvantages. Having so many choices of specialty may cause unnecessary stress. Imagining myself as a French student, I would most certainly agonize over trying to make the right choice of specialty because there are almost too many choices. I am thankful that I do not have to choose a significant portion of my courses until college. Surprisingly, Science is a required subject for students in the « voie générale, » but Math is not (*Quels sont les enseignements de spécialité ?*, n.d.). In the United States, Science and Math are both required—and for good reason. For example, my study of vectors in Math made it much easier for me to understand the concept of velocity in Physics the following year. If I had not studied Math and Science, not only would I have missed an important connection between those concepts, but also I would have learned less Physics, because I would have had to spend time studying vectors, rather than learning a new concept.

French students in the « voie générale » are tested on mastery of their chosen specialties in the « bac » (*Détails des épreuves du baccalauréat général*, 2021). Like the « brevet, » the baccalaureate is made up of a teacher assessment and standard examinations. A student's academic performance during « première » and « terminale » accounts for 40% of the student's baccalaureate grade (*Élèves de terminale : tout savoir sur le bac*, n.d.). Science and Technology, History and Geography, two living languages, Physical Education, and the one specialty studied in « première » and dropped thereafter, each account for 5% of the baccalaureate grade. The student's report card from « première » and « terminale » accounts for 10% of the grade. Testing, called the « épreuves finales, » accounts for the remaining 60% of a student's baccalaureate grade. A student in the « voie générale » takes 5 final examinations: French (10% of grade),

Philosophy (8%), each of the two specialties the student studies during « terminale » (16% each), and an oral exam (10%).

The French examination, which students take at the end of « première, » consists of both a written and an oral section (*Détails des épreuves du baccalauréat général*, 2021). A 4-hour written examination accounts for half of the French examination grade; a 20-minute oral examination accounts for the other half. The French system of education emphasizes oral skills and follows students as they develop those skills. The 4-hour Philosophy examination is a written examination. Students are presented with a choice of simple questions to which they must respond, and a text that connects with philosophical concepts studied in « terminale. » According to a popular legend, the baccalaureate Philosophy examination asked "What is courage?" (*Baccalauréat 2021*, n.d.). And in response, a student wrote, "It is this," and nothing more. The student received a perfect score. The specialty examinations, of varying lengths, all include written sections; some also include oral or practical components (especially for laboratory sciences).

The oral examination, called the « Grand oral, » tests students' ability to speak clearly, convincingly, and precisely (*Baccalauréat : comment se passe le Grand Oral ?*, 2021). The American system of education encourages students to speak, but does little to track their progress. I have taken a few courses in Public Speaking; however, I have never been taught to connect my knowledge from other courses with my skills in Public Speaking. Before the 20-minute examination, French students prepare two questions with their teachers or other students. The questions are based on the subject of one or both of the student's chosen specialties. Before the examination officially begins, students present their two questions to a panel of two teachers,

who choose one question. Students then have 20 minutes to organize their thoughts and create a visual aid for the panel (the visual aid itself is not graded). In the first section (5 minutes), students stand up in front of the panel, and explain why they chose to prepare that question and respond to it. For the next two sections, students may sit or stand. In the second section (10 minutes), the panel questions the student to test knowledge and argumentation skills. In the third section (5 minutes), the student reflects on personal goals and explains why the question is useful for the student's future studies or career. The examination is graded out of 20 points. Students are evaluated based on knowledge of their specialty, their ability to form an argument and connect their knowledge, their critical thinking skills, the clarity of their argument, and their rhetoric.

Conclusion

Having examined the American and French systems of education, I have come to know what I value most about my own American education. The focus on play-based learning in preschool encouraged me to be creative from the start, and taught me to love learning—a love which I still have. I wake up in the mornings excited to go to school. When I get there, I look forward to opening my books. I am exhilarated when something I have learned in History class connects to a novel I'm reading in English class, and I am thankful that American schools teach students to contextualize great literature. I also appreciate that my education thus far has been well-rounded: I have a foundation of knowledge from which to study whatever subjects I wish in college, but I still have time to explore multiple subjects before settling on the one or two that I wish to pursue in depth.

While I deeply appreciate my American education, I envy French students for their knowledge of Geography, History of the Arts, and Philosophy. Those three subjects teach them to be aware of the physical and cultural world around them and to think critically. But most of all, I envy French students for their oratory skills. They practice their oral argumentation in Moral and Civic Instruction and in preparation for the DNB and baccalaureate examinations. They also understand how to put their best foot forward during an interview, a skill which is useful for both academic and professional situations.

The "ideal" education sets up students for success in their future studies and life. I feel that my American education has given me solid preparation in reading, writing, Math, and Science. While I find History of the Arts and Geography to be important courses, I feel that taking them in college, if I elect to do so, will be sufficient for my education. However, I wish that I had acquired a stronger foundation in rhetoric and philosophy, especially during middle school and high school.

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