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Infant school in France

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The Role of Infant School within the School System



Infant school is one of the most original initiatives in the French educational system and plays a key role in the provision of early childhood services, as well as in the way the French evaluate and feel about schooling in general. Infant schools in France have long been recognised for their creative pedagogy and high standards of teaching; they are not considered as day nurseries or kindergartens, but rather as **schools** in the true sense of the word. They are the place where experimentation and early learning first take place. The purpose of infant school is to educate and socialise children between the ages of two and six, providing them with the skills needed to “grow up.”

Infant school is not mandatory, but there is a high demand for it. In this respect, France is unique, with nearly 100% of three-year-olds attending infant school, mostly in the State sector. Infant school is perceived as an environment that fosters the development of the child in all the aspects of their personality and as a stage necessary for them to adapt to school provision and later to school achievement. The widespread early childhood psychology and development theories in the sixties led to the widely-held notion that “everything happens before age six,” making infant school a critical place and period designed to anticipate any major difficulties that could jeopardise future school achievement, compensate for any language difficulties prior to learning to read, and ensure gradual socialisation. In addition, increasing numbers of parents have expressed their desire for early childhood education, reflecting the view that attending infant school can make a difference in children’s lives.

From Historic Beginnings to a Well-Established Identity Today



Although France owes its first collective structures for very young children to religious charities, the State committed itself to these very quickly. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, “knitting schools” and, later, “*salles d’asile*” (literally, “rooms of asylum”) welcomed poor children of both genders between the ages of two and seven. Childminders taught the children spinning, knitting, spelling, calligraphy and singing. These institutions became more widespread after 1825, creating a new form of adult-child guardianship outside the family circle that gradually earned legitimacy. From 1828, the State ran social and charitable services provided by philanthropists, hospices, notable donors, churches, and local authorities. These “rooms of asylum” established a statutory teaching programme in 1833, with the aim of teaching children the habits of order, cleanliness, and mutual kindness that would prepare them for “an honest, decent, Christian life.”

From the 1880s, infant schools were recognised as such and were included in the primary education system that is open to children between the ages of two and six. Inspired by the first school inspectors, Marie Pape-Carpentier (1815-1878) and Pauline Kergomard (1838-1925), infant school adopted a positive educational route distinct from what characterizes the elementary route.

There was long a time when only older children attended infant school; it is only more recently that demand to integrate children at a younger age began to rise. Nonetheless, pre-elementary schools long remained a strictly urban institution, intended for the benefit of low-income families. From 1945, attendance increased significantly, the children increasingly represented a cross-section of society, and infant schools became more developed in rural areas. As early as 1975, the Education Act underpinned the commitment of the State to support the development of infant schools. This commitment has been further strengthened today by Article L. 113-1 of the French Education Code establishing the right for all children to attend pre-elementary school *“at age three, in a nursery or infant school located closest to the child’s home, should family request it. Pre-elementary schooling for two-year-olds is given priority where those children are living in a socially disadvantaged environment, whether in urban, rural, or mountain areas.”*

A Specific Structure and Organisation



Today, almost all three-year-olds attend infant school; the percentage of two-year olds has levelled off at around 35%, with widespread variations from one department (administrative district) to the other. Entrance conditions are determined by standard primary school regulations¹ ; the physical health and personal, social and emotional development of the child must be compatible with community life in a school environment.

Free and secular within the state sector (less than 15% of children attend private nursery school), infant education is the founding link in the chain of France's national education system, into which it is fully integrated. There are infant schools throughout the country and they are run according to the same guiding principles as elementary schools:

- Coeducation and equality between girls and boys
- Same school calendar and teaching hours (26 hours per week)
- Authority shared by State and local authorities.

Infant schools are staffed by the same schoolteachers (*instituteurs* or *professeurs des écoles*) and State-trained inspectors as are compulsory elementary schools. Local authorities hire and pay the personnel to assist those teachers, and are responsible for building and maintaining the schools.

The school is organised by age group, with lower, middle, and upper classes. At age six, children are usually admitted to elementary schools. Holding a child back in the upper class is exceptional and is subject to a special procedure. Certain children may be admitted to elementary school at age five.

¹ **Primary school** includes **infant school**, from age two to six, and then **elementary school**, from age six to ten.

Infant School, a Place for Early Years Education



Infant school is the first step of a long educational route – a five-year-old child has a sixteen-year long “educational route” ahead of him. It is also a time and place of transition between home and elementary school, which is more demanding and prescriptive. The overall objective of infant school is to bring out all of the child’s abilities, so as to help him shape his personality and give him the best chances for success in school, by providing the fundamentals. Infant school is also the place where certain disabilities (sensory, motor, or other learning disabilities) may be identified.

What the child learns at infant school is different from what he has learnt or will learn at home. The school is a tailored microcosm of society suited to young children who are learning to communicate. It is also where children are first exposed to the national language and culture. Children learn to express themselves more accurately, complete more demanding tasks, and feel satisfied when they have achieved something that proves they are growing up and making progress. Children also gain an awareness of the benefits of learning through the feedback of the classroom teacher and their peers.

Pedagogy Focusing on Spoken Language and Play-Based Learning

Preventing disabilities and learning difficulties

Infant school teachers often play an important role in the early detection and prevention of disabilities. The goal is to identify difficulties and work in cooperation with other early childhood services in order to keep difficulties from remaining in the long term. Recently, significant efforts have been made to prevent language disorders and provide earlier treatment.

As early as the first-year class for serious difficulties, or in the third-year class for the early signs of dyslexia, systems have been set up to identify and deal with learning disabilities. As early as three to four years of age, children are seen by doctors at the mother and childcare department, while check-ups for six-year olds are provided by the school doctor.

With its distinct identity and culture designed in line with the age of the children attending, infant school is also known for the innovative teaching methods it uses. When a toddler first enters infant school, he comes face to face with a new world in which he must learn to live. The teachers are careful to provide each child with surroundings and activities that will enable him to grow, in a stimulating learning environment that promotes independence. They pay particular attention to how the school environment is organised in order to facilitate the transition from the sheltered home environment to a group environment. The children's physical needs and schedule are also taken into account in structuring the school day, and the beginning of the day, break, nap or rest times, and meal times are learning experiences. The specially planned activities provide the learning and experimentation conditions that enable the child to find new ways of interacting with the world around him.

Independent **play**, action, experience, and exploration enable the child to find his own path through early learning. Play, a child's preferred method of relating to the world, gives rise to a large number of sensory, motor, emotional, and intellectual experiences. Through play, the child explores the environment in which he lives, invents new physical gestures, communicates with others and discovers the riches of the imagination. Many of the educational activities used by teachers incorporate play.

Oral language skills are the **top priority** of all activities organised. Mastering spoken and written language sets the stage for all learning processes and is often a fundamental prerequisite. Infant school is a school of speech, communication, and realisation of how language works. The child learns French, the national language, which provides access to the culture, but also helps him learn about and understand the world in which he lives.

Five Key Aspects of learning



The infant school curriculum is divided into a number of broad activity areas. Each of these is vital to the development of the child and fits into larger teaching schemes that draw upon rich and varied situations.

Language is the heart of learning

Mastering language - a major factor for success in basic learning – starting with reading – is a priority. Teaching methods must be designed to encourage each child to speak and provide support for those still learning to speak, so that the spoken language becomes their own. The child learns to use language through everyday events, but also through specific learning activities designed to help him progress, based on an evaluation of the language already acquired by the child and the child's needs. The relationship between oral and written language is introduced, preparing the child to learn to read and write.

Living together

The child learns to share activities and space with others; he discovers the rules that govern group life and he forms relationships with adults and classmates alike. Taken in and integrated into the "classroom society", the child builds his personality, develops his ability to communicate and becomes more self-sufficient. Thanks to the many relationships that are developed, the child discovers the pleasure and effectiveness of cooperating with classmates and learns to take on both the benefits and limitations of belonging to a group. Little by little, he builds a frame of reference that will guide him in how to behave or express himself in a variety of situations.



Using the body as a means of action and expression

School is intended to help the child to develop sensory and motor skills: it offers opportunities to extend the scope of his experimentation so that he can better know himself and improve his physical capabilities. The child learns to adjust and vary his actions and discovers a wide range of sensations and emotions, including the pleasure of developing and playing as part of a group.

Discovering the world

Infant school provides a first initiation to the world and to culture. The child discovers a world of objects, living things, natural and human spaces, and learns how to articulate his experiences. He becomes more aware of health- and safety-related problems and of visual and temporal references. He learns to express more



rational questions, to anticipate situations, to observe the effects of his actions, and establish relationships between the phenomena he observes—in short, he makes his first attempts at reasoning. In other words, the child experiments with the tools of intellectual development that make it possible to describe reality, categorise it, order it and, in short, understand it.

Imagining, feeling and creating

In young children, sensitivity, understanding, imagination, and rational intelligence are still closely linked. At an age where emotional intelligence plays a key role, creative and artistic activities are given priority; as means of expression and discovery, such activities open the doors to new ways of learning and exploring new relations with others and with the world.

Infant school encourages expressive language that uses the body, facial expressions, and gestures. The child searches, invents, transforms, expresses, and feels the pleasure of creating. Spontaneity and imagination are called upon and valued. Through this process, the child comes in contact with artistic approaches and cultural references that open him up to different sensibilities and lay the foundation for a common culture.

Skills to be acquired by the end of infant school – the example of language

Excerpt from the Infant School Curriculum



1. Communication skills

The child will be able to:

- answer adults clearly by the end of the first school year (age three or four)
- initiate an exchange and continue it beyond the first response
- participate in a group conversation, implying willingness to listen to others and waiting for their turn to speak, all the while remaining on topic.

2. Skills related to language as an auxiliary to action (situational language skills)

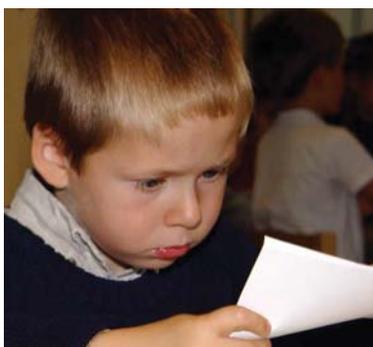
The child will be able to:

- understand ordinary classroom rules
- tell others what he or a classmate is doing (during an activity, workshop, etc.)
- role play using a puppet.

3. Descriptive language skills

The child will be able to:

- clearly recount an event experienced as a group (outings, school activities, incidents, etc.)
- understand a story appropriate to his age and demonstrate understanding by retelling the plot of the story in his own words
- identify the characters of a story, describe them physically and morally, and draw them
- tell a tale he already knows using a series of illustrations for support
- make up a short story in which the characters play the appropriate roles, in which there is at least one event and an ending
- tell or sing at least ten nursery rhymes or finger games and at least ten songs and poems per year.



4. Skills concerning written language

The functions of writing

The child will be able to

- know what a city street sign, poster, newspaper, book, notebook, and computer screen are used for (this means giving examples of language that could be found on any one of these).

Approaching written language and literature

The child will be able to:

- individually dictate a text to an adult, adjusting his speed accordingly, and asking the adult to read the words back so that the child can modify their dictation
- during a group dictation to an adult, correct the syntactic structure of non-grammatical sentences, suggest improvements to the



coherency of the text (pronoun use, links between sentences, re-establishing grammatical tenses)

- retell a passage read by the teacher in his own words
- relate a story read or told by the teacher to significant human experiences
- briefly tell the story of a few fictional characters encountered in picture books or in the short stories told or read in class.

Discovering the sounds of language

The child will be able to:

- give rhythm to a text by chanting the syllables orally
- recognize identical syllables in different utterances (at the beginning, middle, or end of the utterance)
- produce assonance or rhyme.

Graphical activities and writing

The child will be able to:

- write his first name in block letters and in cursive script
- copy words in block letters or in cursive with or without the teacher's help
- reproduce a simple graphical design, explaining the method used
- draw an object or character, either real or fictional
- by the end of infant school, copy a line of text in cursive script, holding the writing implement correctly, aligning the paper correctly with the arm, and making strokes in the correct direction.



Discovering the alphabet

The child will be able to:

- recognise his first name written in block letters by the end of the first year at infant school (by age three or four)
- tell where the words are in a written sentence (in order) after the teacher reads it
- know the names of the letters of the alphabet
- attempt to write a simple word using the alphabet, based on word segments posted in the classroom.

The Relationship between School and Parents: Working Together

Firmly focused on the child, his progress, and his personal development as part of the school community, infant school is very open to parents. Insofar as the school shares in the education of the children entrusted to it by the parents, the relationship between the two parties must be based on mutual trust and communication. The school has the duty to explain, clarify and justify the choices it makes, by clearly displaying and conveying its methods. It is keen on ensuring that each family is heard and on reporting on the child's progress or momentary problems encountered.

Three questions for Eve Leleu-Galland, National Educational Inspector

Author of *Les Cahiers, mémoires de vie*, published by the CNDP de l'Académie d'Amiens, April 2002

How does the school see the role of parents at infant school level?

The most difficult thing to establish between teachers and parents at the infant school level is the right balance of involvement. This is the parents' first contact with the school system, and the experience makes them see their child differently, with greater perspective, as a child who is beginning, little by little, to escape of the boundaries the family circle. Parents also learn a new "job", that of parenting a schoolchild, there are bridges to build between the children, the families and the school, with a view toward dialogue and cooperation throughout the educational process. The expectations of both the parents and the teachers must be balanced against one another so that the child's education can be a success.

What is the student scrapbook?

The student scrapbook helps build the bridges I mentioned. It belongs to the child and travels back and forth between home and school. It enables parents to see what their child is doing at school. The child draws, pastes texts, images, and other bits and pieces of classroom activity in the book. The scrapbook also reflects the life of the child outside of school. At home, he can add photos, writings, and objects gathered during events outside of school. The scrapbook is a starting point for discussion and conversation focused on the child. The family can talk to the child and ask him about events at school that have been recorded in the scrapbook. It is also a sort of memory book that provides a running record, helping the child to become aware of the various stages in his development.



Are there any initiatives to increase family involvement?

At some infant schools, teachers work with parent associations to organise brainstorming sessions on the school calendar and scheduling, the issue of authority, etc. Some also bring together various early childhood professionals in order to address issues from a variety of professional roles and perspectives. This enables us to better identify the specific duties of the various parties and, in turn, to better define the identity of the infant school and make its purpose better understood by all.

Early Years Education: a Social Issue



Today, many families would like to send their very young children to school. The number of women who work outside the home has been on the increase for the past 40 years. In 2002, 80% of French women between the ages of 25 and 49 worked outside the home. Infant schools are attended by more than half of all children under the age of three receiving some type of group care; however, this figure is not consistently distributed throughout the country.

This increasing demand uncovers more fundamental issues about our society and our future choices: how far should schools go in providing care for very young children? Should schools do more to take in this very special group when psychologists have raised the issue of whether this type of group care is healthy for children so young? Two-year-olds can be very different from one another; some are better prepared than others for the limitations of attending school. Is school an appropriate environment for children who have not yet gained independence in terms of washing, feeding, and dressing themselves and who are not yet “individualised” or who have not yet acquired the use and meaning of the word “I”?

School, which remains a place for learning, is not always the best solution for such children. It is probably most appropriate to seek out alternatives to school for young children, such as structures centred on smaller groups for a shorter time. Modular systems have been discussed; such systems would come about through partnerships between various public authorities (the State, local communities, and charitable organisations) and professionals who would, with their various skills and knowledge, work with a given group of children.

School attendance of children under the age of six since 1960

	1960-61	1970-71	1980-81	1990-91	2001-02
Age 2	9.9 %	17.9 %	35.7 %	35.2 %	34.7 %
Age 3	36 %	61.1 %	89.9 %	98.2 %	100 %
Age 4	62.6 %	87.3 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
Age 5	91.4 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %

A few key figures

In 2002-2003, there were **18 460 infant schools** (18 238 public, 222 private) in mainland France and in the French overseas departments.

In 1999-2000, there were **72 060 infant school classes** (71 087 in public schools, 973 in private schools) in mainland France and in the French overseas departments.

In 2002-2003, there were **2 466 267 children** attending infant schools (2 155 715 in public schools and 310 552 in private schools) in metropolitan France.

At the beginning of the 2003-2004 school year, there were **83 200 teachers** in public infant schools in metropolitan mainland France and in the French overseas departments.

Further information



Websites:

The French Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research Website:

www.education.gouv.fr/

The French Schools Directorate Website:

www.eduscol.education.fr/