



The Training and Working Conditions of Preschool Teachers in France

Staffing is one of the most important factors determining the quality of early childhood services. In order to produce and maintain competent staff with qualifications, there should be appropriate training and support, including adequate remuneration and working conditions. This brief presents France's approach to fostering a corps of quality preschool teachers catering for 2-5-year-olds that emphasises a strong systemic linkage to elementary school teachers.

Ecoles maternelles in France

France has a split system of early childhood: *crèches* (childcare centres) for 0-3-year-olds are administered by the social sector, and *écoles maternelles* (preschools) for 2-5-year-olds by the education sector. Children enter elementary school at age 6. *Ecoles maternelles* have been part of the national education system since 1881. Since 1975 and 1989 the provision of *écoles maternelles*, for 5-year-olds and 3-4-year-olds, respectively, has been mandatory. In 2004-05, all children ages 3, 4 and 5 and 26.1% of 2-year-olds were enrolled in *écoles maternelles*.¹ Currently, 80% of children in *écoles maternelles* are in public institutions, which are free of charge.²

Learning cycle

In 1989, the government merged the preschool and elementary school system for children ages 2-11 into three three-year cycles: *Early learning cycle*, *Basic learning cycle*³, and *Development cycle*⁴ (Figure 1). In this new framework, the last year of *école maternelle* for 5-year-olds is placed together with the first two years of elementary school in the Basic learning cycle. The change necessitated the introduction of an integrated training system for teachers of *écoles maternelles* and elementary schools in 1991-92.

Figure 1: Preschool and elementary school system in France, before and after 1989

Age	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Before	Preschool education (<i>école maternelle</i>)				Elementary education					
After	1 st cycle (Early learning cycle)		2 nd cycle (Basic learning cycle)			3 rd cycle (Development cycle)				

Initial training

Prior to 1991-92, *école maternelle* teachers were trained separately from elementary school teachers. After obtaining a high school diploma, *école maternelle* teachers-to-be enrolled in a 2-year professional training course in post-secondary schools. Upon successful

completion, they were qualified to teach in *écoles maternelles* only.

By contrast, the new system introduced in 1991-92 integrated the training of teachers of *école maternelles* and elementary schools. A 3-year university degree is required for both groups of teachers, followed by professional teacher training that lasts 2 years. Like elementary school teachers, *école maternelle* teachers are now required to have a total of 5 years at the university level, which is the highest requirement for preschool teachers among OECD countries.⁵ Table 1 below summarises the major changes made in 1991-92.

Table 1: Initial training system of *écoles maternelles* teachers in France, before and after 1991-92

	Before	After
Title of early childhood teacher	<i>Institutrice</i> (preschool teacher)	<i>Professeur d'école</i> (schoolteacher)
Qualification required to enter professional training	High school diploma	3-year university degree
Length of professional training	2 years	2 years
Institution providing professional training	Teacher training college	Teacher training university institutes
Age group qualified to teach	Children 2-5	Children 2-11
Workplace	<i>Ecole maternelle</i> only	<i>Ecole maternelle</i> and elementary school

Continuous training and career development

Both *école maternelle* and elementary teachers are entitled to 36 weeks of government-paid, continuous training, most of which is taken in the beginning of their careers. Inspectors and pedagogical counsellors also provide teachers with 4 half-days of obligatory training per year. In addition, a long-established professional association for *école maternelle* teachers, the *Association Générale des Institutrices et Instituteurs des Ecoles Maternelles Publiques*, offers annual conferences and other kinds of professional support (e.g., publication of resource materials).⁶

Teachers can opt to work in either *écoles maternelles* or elementary schools, and can move from one to the other at any point in their careers. This flexibility is regarded as a positive change introduced in 1991-92, and is appreciated by teachers. Moreover, *école maternelle* teachers have opportunities to become school directors, teacher trainers, school counsellors, school inspectors and even secondary and high school teachers if they pass an internal competitive examination.⁷

¹ Repères et références statistiques édition 2005, www.education.gouv.fr

² Parents pay for meals on a sliding scale according to their income level.

³ *Cycle d'apprentissage fondamental*, or basic learning cycle.

⁴ *Cycle d'approfondissement*, or development cycle.

⁵ OECD Country Note: ECEC Policy in France, 2004.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <http://www.education.gouv.fr/personnel/enseignant/carriere.htm#salaire>

Status, salary and working conditions

Like elementary, secondary and high school teachers, *école maternelle* teachers belong to the highest category of the French civil service system,⁸ and are paid according to the national salary scale. They receive a salary concomitant with the length of service and some complementary remuneration, such as payment for monitoring children's progress and for a weekly supplementary hour of work.

In *écoles maternelles*, assistants⁹ help teachers with both pedagogical work and daily tasks, such as toileting and clean-up. Some *écoles maternelles* also employ play workers to help teachers carry out various activities with children. Teacher assistants and play workers are both certified personnel.¹⁰ The presence of trained assisting personnel is an asset for both teachers and the children.

Remaining issues

It is clear that the French government invests considerably in the *école maternelle* workforce. The provision of appropriate pay, working conditions and government-paid initial and continuous training to *école maternelle* teachers is a telling indication that the government is committed to increasing teachers' competence and job security as a basis for quality services.

However, early childhood experts and professionals have voiced concern over the decreased emphasis on early childhood pedagogy that has resulted from the integration of *école maternelle* and elementary school teacher training in 1991-92.¹¹ They argue that, while integrated training promotes shared identity and a common base of knowledge and skills among *école maternelle* and elementary school teachers, it fails to provide sufficient opportunities to learn and practise child-centred pedagogy and to organise activities for young children.¹² Compared with some other European countries, such as Sweden and Spain,¹³ the extent to which *école maternelle* teachers-to-be in France receive specialised education in early childhood during their initial training appears modest.¹⁴

This "schoolification" in France is typical among countries forging a closer link between early childhood and primary education. It reflects the inherently unequal relationship

between these two levels of education. Any attempt to integrate early childhood and primary school teacher training should ensure that the training will properly equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to promote young children's holistic development.

Another challenge is the gap between *école maternelle* teachers and other early childhood professionals (e.g., *crèche* workers and day care staff) working especially with 0-3-year-olds. While *école maternelle* teachers receive a post-university 2-year teacher education, which has become more academic, *crèche* staff receive a year of professional training in nursing and are certified by the Ministry of Health. These increasingly distinct orientations, levels and lengths of training between the two groups of workforce raise concerns about pedagogical continuity between different early childhood service types. Furthermore, the gap exists in terms of status and salary: *école maternelle* teachers enjoy more favourable conditions than others.

Thus, the French experience also points to a need to rethink the training and working conditions of the entire early childhood sector, to engender coherence and continuity in the child's experience -- not only from pre-primary to primary education but also from birth, reflecting the vision of lifelong learning.

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⁸ Category A State Public Employee.

⁹ *Agents territoriaux des écoles maternelles*.

¹⁰ Unlike *école maternelle* teachers, teacher assistants and play workers are municipal employees appointed by the mayor.

¹¹ See, e.g., SNUipp *Fenêtre sur Cours*, no. 229, October 2002, p. 22; OECD, 2004.

¹² For example, the content of the initial training tends to be discipline-based (e.g. French, math, science), which is common in elementary education but less appropriate in preschool settings, where children learn through activities of a cross-disciplinary nature. Also, practicum in *école maternelle* is optional during the initial training, depriving teachers-to-be of opportunities to be trained properly on how to work with younger children.

¹³ The preschool teaching profession in Spain and Sweden is conceived to specialise in and work with children 0-6, in contrast to *école maternelle* teachers in France qualified to teach 2-11 year-olds. This is one reason for a stronger emphasis on early childhood specialisation in the initial training in the former.

¹⁴ OECD (2004) recommends increased emphasis on early childhood in both initial and continuous training (p. 48).

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