

Teaching children in France has been an interesting experience on various levels. What I find particularly fascinating is how certain cultural norms present themselves in the classroom. The one instance that sticks out in my mind was when I gave my first test to my second and third graders. I thought it would be a good idea to incorporate some extra credit onto the test. Yet, I would soon learn that something meant to motivate and inspire children would only create confusion.

The day before the test, I had given the kids a list of topics they needed to review. While it did not cover everything we had gone over in class, it did touch on the main subjects. The graded portions of the test included only the topics I told my students to review: no more and no less. However, the extra credit consisted of a question that we had gone over a few times, but that they had recorded in their notebooks at one point or another. I wanted to instill in them that I would reward going above and beyond certain expectations. In effect, their extra efforts would have warranted a greater prize in the end. Convinced that my children would appreciate the idea of extra credit as much as I did at their age, I put it on the test.

Test day had come, and I put my theory to use. After passing out the tests, I brought their attention to the question for extra credit. I explained that they would gain an extra point on the test if they put down the correct answer, and that they would not be penalized if they did not know it. Panic filled their eyes, and I heard “Mais on n’a jamais appris ça!” (Loose translation, “But we never learned this!”) Again, I told them that, “it was not a big deal, try to guess anyway.” Unfortunately, their fear persisted and the reactions of my students to extra credit were virtually identical in every class. One girl even put down the right answer, but had a perplexed look on her face when she saw an extra point added to her score. I pondered upon this subject and thought of the different reasons as to why this could be. After some reflection, I

theorized that French children's difficulty with grasping a concept like extra credit stemmed from cultural norms. Whereas American culture breeds a spirit that prizes individuality, a more socialist environment persists in France. Perhaps one of the reasons why American children love extra credit is because they want to go the extra mile to stand out and be noticed; conversely, French children may not be as excited at this idea because they live in a culture that values a more collective spirit. Either way, I am still hopeful that the children in my class will one day be excited about the possibility of getting an extra point on a test.

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