

Some Things Never Change, or Do They?

Before coming to France, I studied French but also majored in psychology as an undergraduate. The psychology student in me expected the cross cultural differences would be interesting and good rough material for an informal research study I was going to conduct in my head.

Maybe this comes from my watching one too many French New Wave movies in the past, but I had a very specific image of French schoolchildren in my mind. I thought they all wore uniforms, were well behaved, and always walked two by two. Well, one thing proved to be true: they do walk in lines two by two at all times.

I don't mean to be misleading with the comment on behavior, they aren't better or worse behaved than American kids; they are just that: kids. They all have tons of energy and will misbehave, no matter what country they live in. Some things never change.

A rather amusing lesson I have learned in doing the necessary discipline that comes with this job is that the words said don't matter so much as the tone I say things in. There still exists that universal look of fear when a child is scolded. The "Don't do that again! Do you understand me?" is **always** followed by a complete cessation of the behavior in question, a wide-eyed nod "yes" as the kid sits up just a little bit straighter. Even if they didn't understand a single word of what I said, the message was communicated. That's the power of tone of voice. And it is quite something to see in action in a classroom.

Kids around the world are the same in some ways, but France is not the United States; different cultures mean that discrepancies will always exist between the kids in said cultures. Here are a few of the things that stand out to me.

One reason I love French kids is their tendency toward the dramatic. It is a thing that, as a teacher, can be exhausting but, more often than not, it adds to their charm. For example, when a kid messes up a drawing, they didn't just make a "little mistake" they have "complement raté" which translates roughly to "completely screwed up" or "totally failed". When doing artwork or a word search, if someone else does the same thing they do, they cry out indignantly with a loud "*Copieuse!*" ("Copier!") When they like your clothes or jewelry, they say that it is "*trop belle*" ("too pretty") and when

someone is a good artist, what they have worked on is “too well drawn (*trop bien dessiné*)”. This is a grammatical fault, of course, but it is something that cracks me up every time I hear it and doesn’t surprise me at all that it only adds to the dramatic tendencies. When someone isn’t allowed to do something, they “don’t have the right” as opposed to being “not allowed”.

They are also very attached to their writing materials. This is not the case with American kids. I find that, with them, most of them will write with pretty much whatever is in their hand and have sloppy handwriting. Penmanship is much more enforced here in France, and an extension of that is the obsession with pencil cases and their contents, affectionately known, in French, as “*les troussees*”. Whenever we write anything down in class, the kids ALWAYS ask what color and what type of writing utensil should be used. This may not sound that strange, but I will go further to prove my case. (No pun intended.) When we do a word search, the kids bring their rulers to make straight lines around the words as they are encased. They will NOT write a new entry in their agendas without having a straight edge to make a new line for this entry. They know each others pencil cases by heart when I pass them out and have known this since the first week of school.

Maybe France is a place that still places emphasis on things long considered to be unimportant in a technological age, like good penmanship, or it could just be a particularity that should be taken for what it is. At any rate, it’s always interesting to me to note the subtle cultural differences that seem to strike more of a chord with me than the so called “big” ones.

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