

## Chapter 10

### School Days

#### *The Survival of the Smartest*

*Where America extols money, West Germany work and Great Britain blood, France has nailed its flag to the post of cleverness. It is achievement in the educational field which determines inclusion among the decision-makers of French society. The nation is governed by its star pupils, and the higher reaches of management are no exception.*

Jean-Louis Barsoux and Peter Lawrence  
*Management in France*

In the country of Voltaire and Balzac, Chateaubriand and Zola, Descartes and Pasteur, brains are the way to measure worth, and education is the way to furnish and train the brain, leading to the power and the pleasures of body and mind that French people find make life worth living.

Education is the consuming concern of all French people. I said all. It unites them. It gets them out in the street, regardless of their politics, their religion, their color, their region. If you ever need a conversational topic with a French person, ask him about the recent reforms. You don't have to know which. There are always reforms in progress, because every new Prime Minister and every new Minister of Education have to show that they realize that education is closest to his electorate's heart.

In 1984, the Socialist government ("the Left"), voted in for the first time since the Second World War, decided to live up to the anti-clerical doctrines espoused since the French Revolution, and incidentally collect some money for its seriously depleted coffers. It proposed to take away the government subsidies from Catholic schools. This meant that these schools, attended by a large minority, would become a great deal more expensive.

The Catholic Church organized one of the public processions (*manifs*) for which the French are famous. About a million people took part – from

The actual day of the *Rentrée*, the first day of school, is referred to by the media as "J", for *jour* (day) with a capital J. They start counting the days at "J-10", or J minus 10: that is, 10 days to go till the big one. As they roll by, each day brings interviews of school preparations in towns and villages all over the country, and spreads and interviews on various school concerns. What sort of book bag should the parents buy? A sack or a briefcase? 15 possibilities are presented, along with diagrams of the points where each one might strain the back. What kind of haircut is in this year? For boys? Girls? Short? Long? or half way up the back of the head?

Whole sections of newspapers are given over to health care for school children, a major preoccupation, for missing even a week can make a difference in your class rank. The competition is such that you can't expect a schoolmate to show you the material you missed. The role of sleep, exercise, brushing of teeth and proper diet in getting top marks is emphasized, along with the obligatory injections for contagious diseases.

As for what to wear, this subject is so consequential and the possibilities so numerous that J-3 and J-2 (the last two days to the *Rentrée* but one) are usually given up entirely to it. Little girls of six must already make the fatal choices of Look which will affect how they're regarded. Skirts or dresses, Bermudas or trousers, and what cut? Anyone faintly alive this year (1994) can report that the *caléçon*, or tights without the feet, that often looks suspiciously like long underwear, is in for all females under 70.

Don't bother trying to buy any office supplies from August through *La Rentrée*. Everything you might need has been shoved back to the storage rooms to make room for schoolbooks, notebooks, notebook paper, crayons, bookbags, etc. etc., usually displayed back of huge color posters of grinning girls and boys waving as they march joyously back to school.

Now we've reached J-1, the big *Jour* minus one. This is the day of the teachers' *Rentrée*. They meet at the school to hear a speech from the director (the *proviseur*) and find out about their classes. They're the vanguard of the French Ministry of Education. Now that the Soviet Army is no more, this institution employs possibly more people than any other in the world, something over a million. Its budget is 20.1 percent of the national budget.

For the French, it is this army which is of supreme national importance. The teachers, the elite troops of this army, are interviewed, photographed, followed and invited on television talk shows. Is French secondary education still turning out supremely literate graduates? Can they still recite lines from *Phédre*? Do they still perceive the resonance of words like honor and glory from *Le Cid*?

both the Left and the Right. They were taken out to Versailles in special trains. They walked the 12 kilometers to Paris. The government backed down.

The French were marching for their *liberté* and *égalité* - their freedom to choose the school for their child without undue regard for expense, probably the most critical decision they would ever make for him. Whether worker or CEO, French people demand the right to decide on a secular or religious education.

Whichever they choose, it will be among the best offered anywhere in the world, it will decide his whole future and it will be a compelling commitment for the whole family.

That Brigitte Raynaud tried suicide after years of being in the U.S. and off the track, and not being able to get back on, isn't surprising. What is surprising is that she seems to be an isolated case.

School is the most harrowingly demanding thing a French person may ever have to endure. How he fares there determines, for all but a few rich, enterprising or artistically gifted individuals, how agreeable his life will be. Rank and pay in French industrial, financial and governmental hierarchies is directly related to documented evidence of intellectual superiority. Forget your notion that experience counts.

Like the sacrament of food, the school system, and the national priority of brains it represents, has the support of the entire country.

It would have to. Otherwise the suicide rate would have killed off the population long ago. Even the most irascible of francophobes usually restrains his French-bashing when he hears what poor Pierre and Gaston have to go through.

### National Fever

In fact the school system in France is a national fever. It affects everyone. The whole country trembles and quakes from September to June. Whether you have school-age children or not, French television and newspapers will drench you in the periodic pulse-taking of the children themselves.

First, *La Rentrée*. This means The Return from vacation in September. From vacation to work? No. From vacation to school. From May to August, no French person ever mentions September, but *La Rentrée*. At the end of August already begin the first statistics of how many millions of cars are clogging the autoroutes for *La Rentrée*.

A fairly young, attractive teacher, a woman who just wrote a book on the subject, is asked, "What is the hardest thing about the First Day Back?" "Deciding what to wear," she says. "A *caleçon* or a short skirt lacks authority, and a long skirt seems dowdy. So we mostly wear jeans."

And the second most difficult?

"*Séduire les enfants*," she says.

Help! Seduction in the *classroom*? I can see you blanching. Do the sexually obsessed French stop at nothing?

Here we go with one of those *faux amis* (words that look the same in both languages but have different meanings) that start wars. *Déception* is another. *Séduire* (and its noun, *séduction*) has splendor in French, with none of the nastiness that Webster attributes to "seduction", of "leading astray, enticing to disloyalty, inciting to wrong." It means a fullness of pleasing, of charming, of appealing because of certain wondrous qualities. It can be applied to vacuum cleaners and lampshades as appropriately as people. In other words, there are no moral implications. Here's an example from *Les*

*Echos*:

### Hypermarché à la française séduit l'Europe du Nord

What that teacher meant was that seducing the children - charming them so that they would like her, be intrigued by her, respect her, and listen to what she said - was her greatest difficulty at the beginning of the year.

Finally J Day dawns. Half of the 1:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. news broadcasts are devoted to children coming back to school. Now we toil through countless media interviews with them. How much schoolwork did they do over vacation? As much as the school counseled them to do? How do they feel being back? Do they understand and approve of the current reforms?

The camera zooms quickly over three-year-olds in tears and brings us the happy faces of the six- to 18-year olds, grinning like the store posters. Everyone knows these are the last grins until July.

This goes for the parents too. Playtime with your child is over on J Day of first grade.

On J Day the parents are handed their first assignment: a list of all the things they have to prepare for the child to bring to school the next day.

For a foreigner, the list is about as easy to put together as a treasure hunt in Mongolia.

Emily Borel, whose little boy, Julien, just started school in a village in Normandy, reports from the front lines:

"They have all summer to give you the list, right? But they hand it out as you come to pick up your child the first day. A whole page full of everything from about 20 textbooks of different sizes - and their covers - and pencils with 3 different kinds of eraser to a real pen with real ink, and a piece of felt for the ink blots. So, 40 mothers, most of us with smaller children also in tow, go to the paper store at the same time to get all this stuff, because the children have to have them - must have them - in school the next day.

"So I'm standing in line trying to puzzle out the list, and Anaïs - she's my two-year-old - starts screaming. Then all the other toddlers in the store start screaming. Finally I get to the counter and order the textbooks and their covers. You know what the salesgirl says? I have to make the covers myself! For 20 textbooks! They don't sell them! Is this the Middle Ages or what?

"I go home and try to make the textbook covers with paper and Scotch tape. After two hours I give up. Then I tackle the rest of the list, with my dictionary. I come to *une ardoise*.

"The dictionary says this is a roof tile. A roof tile? Well, maybe they're going to build something. So I go to the barn and get a roof tile. Julien takes it to school the next day, along with the uncovered textbooks and the rest.

"When I go to pick him up, he tells me that the *ardoise* was supposed to be a writing slate and that he was the only one in class not to have his textbooks covered.

"I said, Julien, nothing in my life until now has prepared me for this."

After J Day, the fever rises as the mission to learn, and get better marks than anyone else, goes into gear. We quiver and shudder until at last All Saints, Christmas, February, Easter give us a respite and we're told how many millions of French families are gasping for the desperately needed air of the mountains, etc. The parents need the vacations as much as the children, having been up every night helping them with their homework.

### The Bac

Finally we have the paroxysms of June with the *baccalauréat*, known as the *bac*: a series of exams at the end of secondary school that take a whole month. Its outcome determines whether the child will have automatic free entry to university - or not. Photos of children scribbling exams (to prove