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Teaching tradition the French way

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PARIS: The French Education Minister who liked to boast that he always knew which page in the textbook children were studying through out France was exaggerating but only just.

At the beginning of the last century, Napoleon created a body of senior civil servants—the General Inspectors—who still draw up a national curriculum, not only for the state sector, but also for the majority of private schools.

The curriculum extends from nursery schools to post-baccalaureate classes preparing pupils for entrance to the prestigious "grandes écoles". It even includes the area of specialised further education in commerce and technology. Mostly former upper-secondary or "lycée" teachers, each with their own subject, the inspectors formulate precise curricula for the minister's signa-

ture. Fortunately, these are not changed with every new minister and usually last from 10 to 15 years. It is also the inspectors' task to see that teachers follow their instructions in the classrooms.

There is a surprising degree of flexibility in an otherwise highly regimented system. Teaching methods are not stipulated and there are no official textbooks, although these go into more detail than the curriculum.

Any publisher can call on the authors of his choice and offer the result to teachers who have equal freedom of choice—providing they use the same books for parallel classes. Primary textbooks are paid for by the "communes" (smaller local authorities). Lower-secondary books come under the scrutiny of the state. Parents have to pay for upper-secondary, or lycée, books and these are often expensive. It's a lucrative market for

publishers who try to make their wares as attractive as possible and, in view of the huge sums of money involved, many people have called for more central control. Books are often unnecessarily lavish and ambitious, but they do avoid the worst U.K. excesses. Publishers want to sell books, not messages.

There have been significant changes in the past six years in the way curricula are drawn up. When the Socialists came to power in 1981, education minister Alain Savary took responsibility away from the General Inspectors and gave it to commissions covering half a dozen subjects.

Inspectors who sat on the commissions with education researchers naturally resented the move. They were placated by Mr. Savary's successor, Jean Pierre Chevenement, a Socialist whose education policy had a distinctly traditionalist flavour.

He took several inspectors into the ministry as close advisers and sole authors of the curricula, restoring their old role and leaving the commissions to continue reflecting on wider education issues.

Mr. Chevenement chose as his closest associate a former philosophy teacher and General Inspector, Georges Laforest, and gave him the enormous task of drawing up entirely new curricula from nursery school to lycée.

But Mr. Chevenement did far more than merely sign the end result, as his predecessors had done. "For the first time in a century and a half," Mr. Laforest says, "the minister gave very precise guidelines in the form of the three letters to General Inspectors—one each for primary, comprehensive and lycées, subject by subject." He laid down the general aim including bench marks and recommended methods.

Mr. Laforest and his team of inspectors then set about constructing a more detailed curriculum on the basis of Mr. Chevenement's letters, drawing on the commission reports whenever they say fit, and submitting drafts to the minister for approval. "I would ask him to arbitrate on thorny issues," says Mr. Laforest, "and he often added his own recommendations."

In another education innovation, Mr. Chevenement published the final curricula together with his letters in paperbacks which became best sellers, according to French standards. The public shared his desire to improve quality and restore traditional values, which many thought sorely neglected, particularly since the 1977 René Haby reform.

His "back to basics" recipe of effort, merit and discipline, with more than a pinch of patriotism, proved almost more

popular with right-wing sympathisers than with his own party. He reintroduced civic education, said that children must know their "Marseillaise", and be refamiliarised with other symbols of the Republic, such as Marianne, the French flag, and the 14th of July, as well as basic rules of life in a community. They must, he said, know their national history, particularly that of the French Revolution and Third Republic.

A new rigor was introduced into nursery schools as well. French instructions gave guidelines in various activities, initiating children to numbers, self-expression and communication. French children still attend nursery school in their sixth year, but the old embargo on teaching them to read was reaffirmed—familiarity with letters is encouraged but on no account must they be taught to read.