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MOTHER TONGUES

SABINE DEHON

The co-founder of L'Ecole Internationale Franco-Anglaise (EIFA), talks about the joys and challenges of running a bilingual school

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I have been a teacher since 1983 and taught years five and six for around 12 years in Belgium, but I always knew I wanted to be a headmistress.

After teaching, I was an educational advisor to the ministry of education, working as part of a team to re-assess and reintroduce the French and maths curriculum in Belgian schools. I then moved to France, where I studied for a master's degree in education before moving to Britain.

While working as head of the French department at a school in Hampton Court, I kept meeting French parents who wanted their children to continue with French-style education, but couldn't get their children into the French Lycée in South Kensington. I decided to create a bilingual department, teaching the French curriculum. I met my business partner Isabelle Faulkner, who's Canadian, when she enrolled her children. Eventually we started discussing the possibility of creating a school like EIFA.

We wanted it to be bilingual rather than simply a French school. We liked the fact that the French curriculum is very rigorous about things like handwriting, how to work in your book, and the way children think as opposed to just the acquisition of knowledge, but we also wanted to include the artistic and creative areas in which the English system is excellent. We thought a bilingual school would offer the best of both worlds.

It took four years to open the school. First we had to find the right location. We looked at where the francophone communities were located to make sure the school was well-placed to meet the needs of parents, but we also wanted it to be an area which had a lot to offer the children outside school. And it had to be a place where parents would be happy to send their children. In Marylebone, we found everything we wanted.

Then we had to find the right building. Most of the buildings here are listed, which means the planning application is very long. I thought the most difficult aspect of starting the school would be the finances, but it was actually the planning applications!

As the executive head, I work on the strategic side of school matters. For example, right now I am working on the possibility of opening an EIFA school in another country. One of my most important tasks is to ensure we are compliant with all the legal and educational guidelines. This can be quite complex, as I am working under French Ministry of Education rules, as well

as English educational law. This requires a lot of administration, but being affiliated with the French Ministry of Education is very important, as in order for a student to get into a French Lycée school in the future, they have to have gone to an accredited school. I love running the school, but it does take a lot of work to keep it running smoothly.

We maintain a strict 50:50 ratio of language teaching in the school. For example, if on Monday morning the children have their lessons in French, after lunch this will switch to English, then on Tuesday they will start in English and switch to French. We also insist that lessons are taught in the teacher's mother tongue, so all the forms have two teachers—one French and one English. It can sound a little complex when people first hear about our methods, but they do work well.

A lot of the children who come to our school have parents who are bi-national, so they are used to communicating in two languages, but we do get children here who do not speak a word of French or English. If that is the case, we give them a lot of support.

The half of the day taught in their new language will be taught on a one-to-one basis. When they have reached the right level, they are then introduced into the classroom for lessons. But we do not just throw them into the class—they will still have some individual sessions and we have teaching assistants who are there to look after children who have just been introduced and make sure they are not falling behind.

If a child starts in September without one of the languages, by about Easter they will be ready to start participating in whole-class lessons. They are not bilingual at this point, but they are beginning to find their way in the new language and will be able to follow their subject with their peers. In about two years, the children are fully bilingual and happy to talk in both languages. As long as the communication between the teachers is of the right standard, we find this system works very well.

The complexity of what we do means that the recruitment process can be challenging. I want to hire people for whom what we do here comes naturally. I think it is very important to maintain the specific spirit and culture of the school, because the children enjoy it and the teachers love it here.

It is really important for me to still be involved very closely with the everyday running of the school, even though it is no longer my prime responsibility. I put my heart into opening it and ensuring it is what I believe a school should be: the ethos, the atmosphere, the culture within the school are very personal. It is much more than just a job.

Every day when I open the main door to welcome the children, I can see the smiles on their faces and know that they are very happy to come to school. This is very important: when a child is not worried and has no stress, they learn well. Seeing that is, for me, the most rewarding thing.

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