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# Developing global-minded critical thinkers

TFS aims to provide students with experiences that challenge a single-perspective mindset

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

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Toronto French School (TFS) had its genesis in 1962, when Harry and Anna Giles founded a bilingual school in their basement. The school had just two students (their kids) and one Francophone teacher (from Beirut). But the couple wanted their children to be bilingual citizens with a global point of view.

Fast-forward to the present. TFS now has 1,450 students from age 2 to mid-late teens (Grade 12) on two campuses (one in North York and another in Mississauga). But its values haven't changed.

"We start from the very basic premise that a person can quite easily become a prisoner of one perspective," says Khalid El-Metaal, deputy head of teaching and learning for TFS. In an increasingly interconnected and heterogeneous world (and even city), where we face "common global challenges requiring a concerted effort," he contends, it is crucial to have a perspective that "transcends" your own experience.

"You're not going to solve climate change unilaterally," El-Metaal says. "As a school, our goal — or at least one of our goals — is to provide students with experiences that challenge that single-perspective mindset and help them develop

some form of empathetic understanding of people with cultural experiences different from their own."

## Curriculum: a road map to culture

Simply teaching fluency in French and English plays a role in opening students' minds to different ways of thinking, according to El-Metaal. He points out that language enables students to access literature — a very deep expression of language — and gain insights into different cultures.

But TFS goes beyond simply teaching the French language. Unlike many other French-immersion schools, it teaches the curricula of both Ontario and France.

"Curriculum, in many ways, represents the values of a nation — it represents the way they see the world. And therefore, by definition, it is a different perspective on the world," El-Metaal says.

For instance, he says, the French curriculum strongly emphasizes the concept of "citizenship."

"There's this idea that we must develop as citizens, as well as individuals," El-Metaal says. "That means we have a responsibility that goes beyond ourselves and our families. We have a responsibility toward the society in which we live. That is one of our core beliefs at TFS."



TFS

TFS helps its students become "citizens of the world" through trips to foreign countries.

## An emphasis on deep understanding

Informing the curricula further, TFS teaches through the framework provided by the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, launched in 1968 in Switzerland with the intent of encouraging critical thinking and a deep understanding of global issues and interdependencies.

At TFS, debate and discussion are strongly encouraged. Every student, for example, is part of a mentorship program consisting of an instructor and a group of six to 10 students who meet regularly to discuss and propose solutions to issues in their own lives and the world around them.

Topics can include personal questions (such as how to be a good friend), as well as some of the big problems the world faces, from climate change to hunger. Proposing and analyzing solutions to some of those thorny issues is part of the process for mentorship groups.

"We're trying to teach our stu-

dents that sitting on the sidelines is not an option — action is important," El-Metaal says.

But rather than simply accepting solutions, warts and all, the groups critically analyze the implications of each action proposed. The message: "If you're rushing to an action, you might be doing more harm than good," El-Metaal says.

"We want our students to learn how to formulate strong arguments and be able to have a dialogue with each other about ideas without personalizing them."

## There's no substitute for being there

It's difficult to be a citizen of the world if you've never travelled beyond the borders of your own country.

With passports, suitcases and dictionaries at the ready, TFS students have opportunities to participate in everything from language immersion trips (this year to Martinique, China and Spain), as well as service projects in places such as Peru and,

this year, India.

But in keeping with TFS's emphasis on critical thinking, students are encouraged to analyze their cultural viewpoints, particularly in developing nations.

"We don't want to reinforce a form of neo-colonialism," explains El-Metaal, who grew up in Egypt, was educated in Britain and France and worked internationally before coming to Canada. "We don't want students going in there with the idea that these people need our help and we are going to save them from poverty or ignorance, or whatever."

Instead, service projects emphasize developing understanding and respect for different cultures and encourage engaging in dialogue "about how we can work together to move things forward," El-Metaal says.

"Then it becomes a kind of cross-cultural exchange. We can learn as much from them as they can learn from us."

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