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Jean-Baptiste De La Salle and the Education of Teachers

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Résumé/Summary/Resumen

The relationship between 'training' and education' in the preparation of future teachers is crucial to how we understand this important process. Sometimes this relationship is set out in a binary way: are we offering students an opportunity to learn a set of skills and techniques which will be helpful in the classroom situation or should we be offering our students an opportunity to engage in an academic way about a broad range of educational ideas?

A starting point for this paper is that a sharp separation of skills and knowledge is artificial. Skills, be they intellectual or practical, are the means to the transmission of knowledge. A properly skilled teacher allows students to engage meaningfully with bodies of knowledge and encourages an ethical and 'wisdom-driven' response to what has been learnt.

The debate on the education of teachers has special resonance for those with an interest in Catholic education. The teacher in the Catholic school has a vocation to develop a firm understanding of pedagogical ideas rooted in a Catholic vision of the human person. Teacher education processes should be aware of this crucial dynamic. One way of revitalising the education of teachers for Catholic schools is to rediscover the work of St Jean Baptiste de la Salle (1651-1719), perhaps the 'founder' of teacher education. We will look

carefully at his major work *The Conduct of the Christian Schools (Conduite des Écoles Chrétiennes)*, first published in 1720. In studying this important historical text, we are truly working in the context of both *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, two important terms which remain at the heart of Catholic thinking today.

The paper will use two key questions to set out some ideas for the education of future teachers for Catholic schools. The questions allow contemporary educators and academics to learn from a fixed period in history but use these insights to reflect on contemporary challenges. The questions are as follows:

- In what way can the contemporary educator learn from the work of De La Salle?
- How does the model of Teacher Education depicted here relate to contemporary expectations?

SUMMARY

Teacher education for Catholic schools recognises the important partnership of pedagogy, knowledge and faith. Successful schools need well educated teachers so good Catholic schools need teachers who have benefitted from an integral and faith-centred formation. The work of Jean Baptise de La Salle is a necessary source for understanding the processes of teacher education for prospective Catholic teachers. His direct pedagogical instructions and pastoral meditations together form a suitable corpus for reflection today.

KEYWORDS

De La Salle, pedagogy, Catholic education, teacher education

Introduction

It is not easy to escape debates in education over the relationship between knowledge and skills. Such a simple dichotomy cuts across much educational policy-making today with profound implications for the life of schools. Much of this contested territory is occupied with the nature and content of the school curriculum and related questions such as: who decides which aspects of knowledge are to be included in school curricula; do bodies of knowledge privilege particular worldviews to the exclusion of others with less powerful advocates and how can teaching be inclusive and hence allow all young people to flourish?

Student teachers have a double-identity as both 'students' and 'teachers' (Caena, 2014). A *fortiori* Teacher Education, alongside dealing comprehensively with the many and profound educational implications of the so-called knowledge / skills debate, must also grapple with the relationship between the life of the school and the nature of the Teacher Education programmes studied in tertiary institutions. (I will use 'Teacher Education' as the preferred term for all processes of formation aimed at prospective teachers.) To be clear, should Teacher Education be explicitly linked to the national school curriculum—and hence be professionally 'relevant'—or take the form of a more liberal programme of studies which aims principally at wider intellectual formation (Franchi, 2016)? This debate becomes more complex when dealing with those who wish to teach in Catholic schools.

One way of revitalising Teacher Education for Catholic schools is to rediscover the work of St Jean Baptiste de la Salle (1651-1719), perhaps the 'founder' of Teacher Education. The article will consider if De La Salle's major work, *The Conduct of the Christian Schools (Conduite des Écoles Chrétiennes)*, first published in 1720, can still offer meaningful advice for contemporary educators

and students. This important historical text demands a hermeneutic of both *ressourcement* ('return to sources') and *aggiornamento* ('updating'), two important terms which remain central to Catholic thinking today. Both suggest a dynamism which should lie at the heart of studies in education and especially in all aspects of Catholic education. As they were crucial to the Catholic Intellectual Revival of the early twentieth century and the work of the Second Vatican Council, they encourage us to see De La Salle's contribution as more than a historical piece but as a major contribution to an educational tradition that continues to evolve in different cultural contexts.

A skilled and proficient teacher in both schools and universities will encourage students to engage meaningfully with inherited bodies of knowledge. They will guide students to use the skills of reflections and critical enquiry to develop an ethical and 'wisdom-driven' response to all material studied. This pedagogical choice is far removed from an unsophisticated sense of 'constructivism' which often underpins self-proclaimed 'modern' pedagogies of education (Kirschener, Sweller and Clark, 2006). Given that the present paper is focussed on Teacher Education for Catholic schools, such important pedagogical debates must contribute to and be informed by contemporary understandings of Catholic education. Two key questions will frame an important discussion on De La Salle's possible influence on Teacher Education:

- In what way can the contemporary teacher educator learn from the work of De La Salle?
- How does De La Salle's model of Teacher Education relate to contemporary expectations from government and the Church?

The questions allow contemporary educators and academics to learn from a fixed period in history but, crucially, use these insights to reflect on contemporary challenges. The article begins with a retrospective on the work of St Jean Baptiste de la Salle and then applies his insights to the formation

processes for prospective Catholic teachers today. It ends with an excursus on how Jesus formed the Apostles as the first teachers of Christianity.

Learning from Jean Baptiste de la Salle

The first section explores some biographical details of De La Salle. This is followed by a summary of how De La Salle's work has been evaluated by (mainly Anglophone) historians of education. It concludes by exploring some aspects of De La Salle's ideas on how teachers should be formed.

Jean Baptise de la Salle: Brief Biographical Details

Jean Baptiste de La Salle, a French priest from a wealthy background, developed an increasingly keen interest in education. He recognised a need for greater organisation of the educational 'system' of his time, such as it was, to allow boys of limited means to be (at least minimally) educated. De La Salle is the founder of the *Brothers of the Christian Schools*, a famous teaching congregation of the Catholic Church, now known popularly as the De La Salle Brothers.

De La Salle's 17th century France was witness to the birth of new social movements and much political and religious unrest (Hamilton, 1989). The monarchy of Louis XIV (1643-1715) had made France a formidable European power but its educational system was very patchy and few opportunities for education were available to those who were not part of the privileged sections of society. Any educational opportunities for the children of the poor relied chiefly on the charity of those with both the means and the desire to remedy this deep cultural deficit (Bowen, 1981). It is in this challenging cultural and social context that we glimpse the rise of the many teaching congregations of the Church which were born in France and continue to play such a key role in

the development of education in the Church and in wider society (Carter, 2012).

As noted above, De La Salle did not operate in a vacuum but sought to develop existing educational initiatives. This is an important pedagogical point: all good educators are called to develop ideas from the seeds of good practice scattered around us. While it is good to be open to new ways of doing things, it is also good to be wary of a constant search for novelty. To be clear, De La Salle sought to systematise ideas on education which he had absorbed from his relationship with Nicolas Roland, a canon of Reims Cathedral, and Adrian Nyel, a member of an 'apostolic group' of itinerant teachers (Fitzpatrick, 1951). De La Salle saw himself initially as no more than a 'helper' in Nyal's important educational enterprise. From humble helper, De La Salle grew in stature and influence to become a major educational reformer of the time. What is worth thinking about is why his many contributions to educational practice have not always received the universal recognition they deserve.

De La Salle in the History of Education

It is safe to say that De La Salle made a positive contribution to educational practice. He is famed *inter alia* for his work in establishing a network of 'free' schools' – elementary schools for boys run by his group of collaborators (Hamilton, 1989). This is the first systematic attempt to organise a system of readily available popular instruction, something which is often taken for granted today.

It is curious to note, however, that standard works on the history of education do not always agree on De La Salle standing in the field of education. While some volumes praise his contribution in the highest terms, others seem to ignore

him completely. What lies behind this divergence in thought is hard to say. Is it the case that secular-minded historians have no great desire to place a Catholic priest in the pantheon of great educational reformers?

Writing in 1887, Gabriel Compayré, in his renowned *History of Pedagogy*, noted that De La Salle was the first to organise a system of Catholic schools in a comprehensive way. While Compayré was not brimming over with enthusiasm for the way in which De La Salle's schools and teachers went about their business, he did accept that they were an advance on what was already in place:

But considered in their time, and compared with what existed, or rather with what did not exist, the establishments of La Salle deserve the esteem and the gratitude of the friends of instruction (Compayré, 1887, p. 258).

Nonetheless, Compayré's criticisms of De La Salle are heavy and merit careful consideration. *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, for Compayré, has an 'absence of life' owing to the authoritarian role afforded to the teacher (p. 266). Compayré's analytical summary of De La Salle's work (p. 267f) is double-edged: while he lauds De La Salle for an energetic and humane spirit, he laments the 'wretched' state of those young men De La Salle allowed to teach. This is a positive assessment of De La Salle in the context of the time but warns against, it seems, turning his methods into general educational principles.

Anglophone histories of education tend to lack the detail of Compayré's work. Boyd's *History of Education* (1929) affords De La Salle one line in a text of 457 pages: he (De La Salle) is described simply as an advocate of popular education. Good and Teller, in *A History of Western Education* (1947), give De La Salle one paragraph in a text of 607 pages: De La Salle's work is outlined factually with neither comment nor contextualisation. Rusk's *Doctrines of the Great Educators* (1965) has no mention of De La Salle, although Rusk does have a chapter on St Ignatius of Loyola, so he cannot be easily accused of wishing

to ignore the contribution of Catholic thinkers to education. Lawrence's *The Origins and Growth of Modern Education* (1970) fails to mention De La Salle despite having chapters on 'Education in France' and 'The Little Schools of Port-Royal', both of which seem obvious places for some discussion of De La Salle as educator. Cully's edited volume, *Basic Writings in Christian Education*, (1960), is more positive: De La Salle is one of thirty one educators deemed worthy of inclusion in a list of influential educational thinkers. Cully offers a short extract from *The Conduct of Christian School* and comments briefly on De La Salle's methods as rather typical of the period in which he lived. This suggests that there was little of innovation and creativity in De La Salle's approach. Bowen's *History of Education* (1980) includes De La Salle in a chapter headed 'Reformation to Enlightenment: The Extension of Schooling/ The Catholic Conservative Tradition'. Bowen notes that in 1690 De La Salle had established a training institute for teachers at Saint-Suplice (a famous seminary in Paris) and that this is 'the first specifically designated teachers' college in France, and one of the first in Europe - if not the first' (Bowen 1981, p. 119). This is a big claim indeed and highlights the strange lack of recognition of De La Salle in the other historical works cited. Given Bowen's assessment, perhaps there is now an opportunity to reconsider De La Salle's rightful place in the history of education, especially in the field of Teacher Education.

De La Salle and Teacher Education

What is De La Salle's distinctive contribution to Teacher Education? Part Three of *The Conduct of Christian Schools* explores the question of the 'training' of teachers. Although there might be some doubt that De La Salle was the author of this section, the ideas expressed therein chime with the generality of the ideas spread throughout the rest of the treatise.

What is the evidence for labeling De La Salle as a teacher educator? De La Salle addressed the need for teachers to have a rigorous professional training: good schools required teachers well instructed in both pedagogical methods and subject knowledge. While *The Conduct of Christian Schools* is an educational manual in the broadest sense, it is also a 'manual of pedagogy in the preparation of teachers' (Fitzpatrick, 1951, p. 281). Its strength lies in the comprehensive nature of the advice and guidance offered to the prospective teachers. Its weakness, for a modern audience, lies principally in the overly detailed instructions offered, with a sense that creativity, intuition and instinct were not necessary.

An example from *Part One* (School Practices and the Manner in Which They are to be Carried Out) *Section 3, Article 1, Section 2: 'Teachers and Students During Lessons'*, gives a helpful flavour of De La Salle's preferred approach:

Teachers should always be seated or should stand in front of their seats during all lessons, those on the alphabet and syllables as well as those in books or letters written by hand.

They will be careful to maintain a very modest demeanour and to act with great seriousness. They will never allow themselves to descent to anything unbecoming or to act in a childish fashion, such as to laugh or to do anything that might excite the students.

The seriousness demanded of teachers does not consist in having a severe or austere aspect, in getting angry, or in saying harsh words. It consists of great reserve in their gesture, in their actions, and in their words.

What is the best way to engage with this pedagogical advice? Indeed, how would this style of classroom management be received by teachers and pupils today? It would be fair to say, as recognised by Compayré, that such a tight structure was driven in the main by the pupils' need for order and the teachers'

need for guidance. It is important to bear in mind that the pupils of De La Salle's schools were, in the main, young boys with little by way of economic prospects: his schooling 'system' was designed to civilise unruly behaviour and modify as best he could a perceived deficit in the pupils' cultural formation. As Compayré noted in the 'analytical summary' of De La Salle's pedagogy:

The severe discipline and enforced silence of La Salle's schools permit the inference that the school of the period was the scene of lawlessness and disorder. The reaction went to an extreme: but considering the times, this excess was a virtue (Compayré, 1887, p. 277).

Appendix C of Part 3 of *The Conduct of Christian Schools* is where the fine details of the training programme for teachers are laid out. This offers a wider typology of behaviour which is very much in line with the general approaches set out above. It is in two parts. First, it lays out the *defects* which new teachers must lose before prescribing the *qualities* they must acquire.

Uprooting defects	Qualities to acquire
Talking too much	Decisiveness
Agitation and restlessness	Authority and firmness
Thoughtlessness	Reserve (ie serious, thoughtful and modest behavior)
Harshness, severity and impatience	Vigilance
Antipathy for certain students	Attention to oneself

Torpor and the tendency to discouragement	Professionalism
Familiarity	Prudence
Sluggishness and slackness	Winning manners
Sentimentality and particular friendships	Zeal
Lack of concentration or over-concentration	Facility in expressing oneself clearly and with order in a way that children can grasp what one teachers

What would contemporary Teacher Education programmes make of all this? Obviously, the work of De La Salle on the education of teachers is very much of its time. There is a good deal of historical curiosity in reading his works. It is less than clear, however, if this way of acting would be fruitful in the contemporary climate - although there is some merit in considering how aspects of his thought could be integrated into current practices. Before this can be done, it is necessary to find suitable ways to bring this work into the reading lists of universities and colleges who offer Teacher Education.

De La Salle and Catholic Teacher Education: Seeking Integral Formation

Owing to the influence of De La Salle, debates on Teacher Education must have some special resonance for Catholic educators. The teacher in the Catholic school has a vocation to develop a firm understanding of

pedagogical ideas rooted in a Catholic vision of the human person. De La Salle's work hence cannot be left to one side in this endeavour.

Catholic Teacher Education refers to the field(s) of study which allows students the opportunity to attain the academic qualifications required to teach in the Catholic primary and secondary school. It is not restricted to those students who wish to teach the subject of Religious Education / Religious Studies as a specialism. A related term, Catholic Teacher Educator, refers to all academic staff employed universities, colleges and institutes of education with specific responsibility for the intellectual and spiritual formation of the students.

Interestingly, the Church's widely recognised body of teaching on education has little to say on Catholic Teacher Education (Franchi and Rymarz, in press). Some documents issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education offer general ideas for discussion and possible application by local Bishops' Conferences. *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools* (2013), for example, has an important section on the formation of teachers and school administrators (76- 82). The references to 'formation' in these paragraphs clearly understand the formative process as going beyond the initial stages of one's career – what is often described today as 'life-long learning'.

De La Salle's model of Teacher Education united preparation in pedagogy with deep spiritual formation. Like Faith and Reason, they informed and fed each other. De La Salle's many Meditations and wider spiritual writings are not mere appendices to his pedagogical ideas but are very much part of his integrated vision of life and education. For now, however, the focus is on some pedagogical aspects of the vision as found in *The Conduct of Christian Schools* and a consideration of how De La Salle's work can underpin a much needed renewal of Catholic Teacher Education in the era of the New Evangelisation.

De La Salle's combination of professional training and deep spiritual formation reminds us that the vocation of the teacher is to be an ambassador for Jesus Christ. For De La Salle, love of God was expressed in love of the children the Brothers were called to teach. The principal means of formation were a series of Meditations for use with his 'student teachers' in times of spiritual retreat (Koch, Calligan and Gros, Eds., 2004). The short pieces encapsulate the Lasallian vision: they are the *sine qua non* of his educational ideas and remind us that his vision for education was not tied to the earthly success or exam results but had deeper aims. Indeed the focus on using the Meditations in a time of *retreat* brings into sharp relief the paucity of opportunities offered today for a deeper spiritual formation for teachers. To learn from De La Salle, therefore, is to consider how prospective and serving teachers can benefit from a more integrated formation programme.

An example of De La Salle's Christocentricity is found in the Third Point of the Second Meditation:

To bring the children you instruct to absorb the Christian spirit, you must teach them the practical truths of faith in Jesus Christ and the maxims of the holy Gospel with at least as much care as you teach the purely speculative truths.

This extract expresses well the aims and scope of Lasallian educational methods. To put it in contemporary terms, religious formation of teachers is not an 'extra' but deserves to be given the highest profile and support. Catholic Teacher Education is, therefore, no less than the aggregation of processes which put this high ideal into practice. Formation of the mind, body and heart are three pathways emerging from the partnership between faith and reason and, taken together, offer an integral education. Given the many challenges faced by tertiary institutions today, there is a need for firm suggestions regarding how this can be done. One way is to use the Gospels themselves as

sources of reflection by examining Jesus as 'teacher educator'. The following section considers how selected Gospel passage can potentially illuminate how prospective teachers are formed.

Excursus: Jesus as Teacher Educator

In observing and reflecting on Jesus as a teacher educator, we are in fact developing De La Salle's commitment to a Christocentric formative process which needs both intellectual engagement and a commitment to seek holiness in the daily work of the teacher.

Catholic educators are familiar with the notion of Jesus as 'Teacher'. The Gospels are the records of the teaching ministry of Jesus; the rest of the New Testament is the record of the teaching ministry of the early Christians. As an excellent teacher, Jesus had a varied pedagogical approach: He taught directly to large crowds and smaller gatherings, he used questions, stories and concrete examples from daily life. This is evidence of Jesus preparing his closest followers to continue His teaching ministry. The lessons he taught them would then be taught by the Apostles to later groups of neophytes using similar methodology.

Some examples from the Gospels will illustrate how Jesus formed His future teachers. The first example is the famous *Parable of The Sower*. Jesus adopts a two-step process of teaching: he moves from the large-group teaching context (lecture) to the small group (seminar). In the small group, He must respond to requests for clarification regarding the meaning of the apparently obscure parable taught in the 'lecture' (Cf. Matthew 13: 1-44; Mark 4: 1-34 and Luke 8: 4-15). After the explanation, the group of Apostles is better equipped to use the parable in their teaching in the future. While this seem to be a rather schematic

interpretation of a thematically-rich parable, it does offer some insight into how both deductive and inductive processes of education are woven through the Gospels (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997).

A second example is the calling of the Twelve. In Matthew's detailed account (Matthew 10: 1-42), paragraphs 1- 4 simply relate the names of the twelve apostles while in paragraphs 5- 15 Matthew explains why the Messiah should be preached first to the 'lost sheep of the House of Israel'. Paragraphs 9-45 bring together a comprehensive list of practical instructions regarding how the apostles should go about their teaching mission. Jesus reminds them of the difficulties they will face and that they should not be looking for a soft and comfortable life ('A disciple is not above his teacher...'). Alongside what seem to be dire warnings, Jesus reminds them of the love of the Father for them ('He who finds his life will lose it and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.'). In reading this, there is a sense of the demanding vocation of teacher, a vocation which might not always give material rewards.

In the episodes just noted, Jesus is teaching with 'active' teaching techniques. He is aware of the how hard of understanding his Apostles often were and uses these signs to support the verbal evidence of the first witnesses of the Resurrection. The early teachers did not just have first-hand experience of the teaching of Jesus but also experience of how to teach. Contemporary teachers must rely now on the Gospels and wider Church tradition for examples of pedagogy

Concluding Remarks

The initial questions were:

- In what way can the contemporary educator learn from the work of De La Salle?
- How does the model of Teacher Education depicted here relate to contemporary expectations?

In summary, De La Salle is a figure who is very much of time and perhaps some of his methods might not be suitable for use today. Nonetheless, his vision and energy can inspire us to consider how to improve educational outcomes for the poor and ensure that Catholic Teacher Education addresses the spiritual welfare of student teachers, as well as their pedagogical formation.

To answer the questions above, a critical approach to historical documents will see them in the context of their time but seek also to draw some broader principles. In De La Salle's case, in line with both the hermeneutics of 'ressourcement' and 'aggiornamento', a good principle is the need for an integrated formation for prospective Catholic teachers. This important message opens the door to further reflection of how this can be done, where it should take place and how the local and universal Church can work together to promote harmony and essential diversity.

As the Church continues to explore the meaning of the 'New Evangelisation', Catholic schools must also consider what they can contribute to it. Such debates will examine the quality of formation offered to prospective teachers on Teacher Education programmes in colleges and universities. Catholic Teacher Education must be both deeply pastoral and academically rich and those charged with looking after Catholic Teacher Education exercise one of the most rewarding but demanding roles in the contemporary Church.

Looking ahead, the Congregation for Catholic Education is increasingly aware of the need to promote and develop authentic Catholic Teacher Education. *Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion* (2014), the *Instrumentum*

Laboris for a major international congress on Catholic education in November 2015, had a focus on 'Places and Resources for Teacher Training' (2014, Part III 1.k). It offers some broad lines of engagement. It is the role of the local churches and their educational offices to make policy based on this advice.

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