



THE MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOLS (2):

«Live with the pupils the better
to educate them”

03-A-18

In the second number of *Lasalliana* (paper 02-A-12) I gave a general account of “The Management of Christian Schools” in order to situate the work in the context of the 17th-18th centuries, at the beginning of the Institute.

Those few pages underlined the importance and interest of the text but without showing with precision the richness of its contents. That richness will be better shown by a more detailed study of some aspects of the work.

The first part will consist of a detailed account of the conditions under which the first Brothers or schoolmasters worked as regards time, accommodation and programmes. It is possible to reconstruct these elements fairly accurately from references scattered throughout the “Manuscript of 1706” and the “Edition of 1720” of “The Management of Schools”. These two texts can be read simultaneously in the *Cahiers Lasalliens*, No. 24.

LARGE MIXED ABILITY CLASSES

The number of boys in a class was at least 50 and often more. The scarcity of schools, the rising demand of the urban working classes for education from the mid-seventeenth century and the undoubted success of the Brothers’ schools were some of the reasons for the large classes.

More than by their numbers the pupils were characterised by their differences of background, origin and age. In that era compulsory school attendance was unknown and there was no fixed legal age for beginning or ending one’s school career. Enrolment of a child in a school and the length of time he spent there were matters for the parents. The problem of when a boy left school is often referred to in different ways in the “Management” and you can guess that it was a source of constant worry to de La Salle and the Brothers who naturally considered that early leaving meant an incomplete and unsatisfactory education. From other indications in the “Management” and particularly from those referring to writing, which was taught after the age of ten and preferably before twelve, it can be deduced that the majority of pupils were between ten and twelve with extreme cases ranging from six to fifteen or over.

CRAMPED, AUSTERE BUILDINGS

Though we complain today of the lack of teaching space, particularly in the inner cities, nevertheless, we have buildings which are purpose built and sufficiently large and functional. This was not always the case in the early days of the Institute. The schools were usually ordinary houses adapted to the needs of teaching. The floor space considered suitable, as mentioned in the edition of 1720, varied from 25 to 35 square metres for the younger children and from 35 to 43 square metres for senior pupils.

When you consider the number of boys in a class you can form an idea of the space available to each pupil!

Within this space the furnishings were rudimentary: benches and boards or tables for lessons. There was little individual equipment beyond the bare necessities for writing, a reading book for the senior pupils and a catechism. On the subject of equipment you should re-read the last chapter of the edition of 1720.

Of course, such material conditions were not exceptional at the time. They were the lot of most schools for the working classes but they help us to realize to what extent the skill and authority of the teacher had to make up for the lack of teaching equipment.

AN OVERLOADED TIME-TABLE

“The Management of Christian Schools” does not provide a time-table properly so called for the whole day or the whole week but in reading from chapter to chapter especially of the first part we can glean enough fragmentary information to reconstruct an approximate time-table for the master.

The programming of certain activities such as spelling and Latin remains rather imprecise but the following approximation will give a good idea of what was done and when.

Time-table for an ordinary week

	<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>	<i>Saturday</i>	<i>Sunday</i>
7,30	Study of Catechism	Study of Catechism	Study of Catechism		Study of Catechism	Study of Catechism	
8,00	Prayer /Breakfast Writing	Prayer /Breakfast Writing	Prayer /Breakfast Writing	Customary school holiday except when a feast occurs during the week	Prayer /Breakfast Writing	Prayer /Breakfast Writing	
9,00	Reading	Reading	Reading		Reading	Reading	
10,00	Prayer Reflection	Prayer Reflection	Prayer Reflection		Prayer Reflection	Prayer Reflection	PRAYER
11,30	MASS	MASS	MASS		MASS	MASS	MASS
13,00	Study	Study	Study		Study	Study	CATECHISM
13,30	Reading in registers	Arithmetic	Reading in registers		Arithmetic	Reading	VESPERS
15,00	Writing	Writing	Catechism (1 hour)		Writing	Writing	
16,00	Catechism Prayer Exam. of Conscience	Catechism Prayer Exam. of Conscience	Prayer Exam. of Conscience		Catechism Prayer Exam. of Conscience	Catechism Prayer Exam. of Conscience	

The rigidity of such a time-table is more apparent than real. Many imponderable elements forced the schools to be more flexible: the customs of the parish, the number of pupils in the class, the natural rhythm of the seasons as well as fairs and other events of the local calendar.

The essential thing is to estimate the workload that this imposed on the Brothers or masters. In practice, each teacher spent approximately forty hours a week with the same pupils. This certainly allowed him to get to know each one personally and thoroughly.

We must add that the school year was also long: except for a few holidays scattered throughout the year and especially at Easter, the school holidays consisted of the month of September. We have then, to reckon with a school year of at least 46 or 47 weeks which was quite a lot when compared to the present school year in most countries. (It was approximately 280 days)

These figures help us to understand the references to fatigue and overwork, even to the illnesses of teachers and the consequent interruption in the school's work.

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The organization of the school time-table illustrates one of the major and constant concerns of the Institute: to educate children one must be with them. "Children being under the care of teachers from morning to evening, they can teach them to live well".

This accords with the general concept of formation current in the eighteenth century: the child is an apprentice who must learn from a "master", as in all other trades.

It explains also why the terms "model" and "good example" are so important and so often used in the "Management" as means of formation. The master is the one who must always provide models and examples in school activities as in his own behaviour.

Because children, especially "children of artisans and the poor" as de La Salle so often recalls, do not find such models at home, it is essential to send them to a Christian school and to keep them there as long as possible.

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School conditions as we know them, particularly in secondary schools and centres of higher education, are very different from those described in the "Management of Christian Schools". That does not absolve us, as individuals or groups, from asking ourselves the following questions:

- 1) "To live with the young in order to educate them". Is that important today?
- 2) Have we calculated the total number of hours we spend with our pupils? What conclusions do we draw from this?
- 3) Does this time help us to get to know them and help them in their development and growth?
- 4) What can we change in the internal organization of the school or in our own conduct to improve the situation?
- 5) If we do not know our pupils what meaning can we give to our vocation of Christian educators?

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