

THE MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOLS (8): Relations among pupils

To talk about relations among pupils as found in the Management of Schools, it seems to me to be necessary to begin with "Officers". In each class, the teacher designated a certain number of pupils, especially those who had distinguished themselves by their seriousness, their application to work, their traits of character... to these he confided the charge or responsibility of coordinating activities for the good order of the group. These were the offices to which officers were assigned.

These were not the only type of relations which existed among the pupils and I would like to distinguish four kinds of relationships which seem to me to sum up the essentials of what is described in the Management of Schools.

Concerning relationships of authority

The manuscript of the text of 1706 lists four kinds of "Officers". They are assigned by the teacher at the beginning of the scholastic year in view of assuring order in the class, especially when he himself is absent or to fulfill certain tasks which he should not or cannot do himself.

Certain of these "Officers" exercise real power over their comrades, delegated though it may be. This is the case with the "Inspectors" and the "Overseers":

"The duty of the inspector in each class shall be to observe everything which goes on in the class during the absence of the teacher" (p. 210).

"He will faithfully report to the teacher all that has transpired together with all their circumstances; he shall be exact in neither adding anything, nor leaving anything out". (p. 210).

Regarding the "Overseers", their role appears even more ambiguous because they do not exercise their authority openly:

"There shall be in each class two pupils who shall be in charge of checking-up on the conduct of the inspector, while he is exercising his duties, to see if he does not allow himself to be bribed, that he does not exact anything from others in exchange for not reporting their faults to the teacher" (p. 212).

"The teacher will take care that the inspector does not know who the overseers are, and for this reason, they will not be openly appointed like the other officers, and will not hold any title" (p. 212).

Concerning the relations of service

These services are carried out by the other "Officers" designated by the teacher in making use of their qualities and talent. In the exercise of their duties, these shall contribute to the good order of the class:

"All the officers shall be named by the teacher in each class, the first school day after the vacation. Each teacher will follow the advice of the Director or of the Inspector of Schools, and if subsequently he needs to change someone, any further nominations will be carried out in the same manner" (p. 204-205).

It would be useful to note that these officers numbered twelve; some duties were assigned to two pupils at the same time, and others were organized according to a monthly rotation.

These figures seem to me to be interesting, because it underlines the large proportion of pupils who were thus directly associated with the good order of the class. These pupils were on duty:

- during class work
- during prayer or lunch or snack time
- during the Mass in church
- outside of class time by visiting absent pupils, for example.

To give a complete list here would be only of anecdotal interest, the titles pertaining to an older stage of the language and would require too long an explanation.

On the other hand, it seems to me interesting to retain the principal, of the distribution of responsibilities, which determined the naming of such "Officers". It must also be noted that the invention and implementation of this system did not come from the Management of Schools. It can be found in other schools in an earlier epoch than 1706, for example in the well known work "The Parish School".

Concerning relations of mutual help

The first Lasallian Schools constituted a systematization of simultaneous teaching in France. One could consider that this pedagogical situation easily lent itself to mutual help in school work, and many passages in the Management attest that such was so, thus, for example these two quotations:

"During this time, there shall be two people in the first class who will be in charge, on the part of the teacher, to mark on the two papers sometimes a letter or a syllable and sometimes another in a different place, so that the pupils who are learning these things can do their lessons" (p. 4).

"The pupils will assemble during the half-hour period preceding Catechism time, and while they are assembling they will interrogate one another, by pairs, about the diocesan catechism, like the drills which they will do during lunch and snack time. The teacher will be careful to take notice of who should be asking and repeating the catechism during this time". (p. 107-108).

In an even more significant manner, one finds mutual aid:

— during the reading and arithmetic lessons, it is a matter of correcting, that is helping, those who make a mistake.

— to help those who do not understand well, showing them how to read or calculate is a true example of mutual instruction.

— and when the teacher deems it useful for the progress of the group in a section or lesson, he will retain in this group one or more pupils who are more advanced, instead of changing them. They will thus become the motivating elements of the group and they will thus introduce the emulation and dynamism which generate progress. Is this not a nice little example of solidarity?

Concerning the relations of sharing

The clientele of the first schools of the Brothers naturally numbered a good proportion of families which were economically poor. Financial disparities were seen especially during lunch and snack time which the pupils were to take in class. This was, in the spirit of de La Salle, an educational opportunity in propriety and good manners. For these meals, the children were invited to bring their own food, without being constrained. This became an opportunity for those who brought too much food to share their abundance with others, especially true with regard to meat. They were advised not to bring meat because everyone could not afford it, and to share their food.

"They will not be permitted to bring any meat, and if anyone shall bring some, it will be given to the most poor, to those of whom it is sure that they have not eaten any at home" (p. 8).

One of the usual practices was to collect the extra bread so that it could be distributed to those who needed it. This was a way of teaching the Christian concept of compassion and sharing:

"He (the teacher) from time to time even during mealtime, will encourage this act of charity either by a few examples or moving reasons which will inspire them to do this, willingly, and lovingly for the love of God" (p. 15)

Conclusion

These few glimpses of the interior relations in the class at the beginning of the eighteenth century may seem very modest in the light of those which we may experience or observe today.

It is, therefore, necessary to put this back into its place at the origin of simultaneous education to better understand the inevitable gropings in the organization and animation of the class-group.

Let us neither forget that the pupils were not accustomed to disciplined and collective schooling and individual instruction hardly prepared them for it. We know how difficult it is and how long it takes to develop any new group behaviour.

On the other hand, at this period, a clear-cut idea existed with regard to the teacher and the one taught, and this led to a pedagogical relationship of dependence of those who should do their studies under a teacher who knows and directs. In spite of this, we know very well how much John Baptist de La Salle insists in writings other than the Management of Schools, on the respect which must be shown for the child.

In fact, the proposals in the Management of Schools on the internal organization of classroom relations were new, and those who implemented them were pioneers.

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