

**DE LA SALLE'S SCHOOLS
AS ARENAS OF
RESPONSIBLE PARTICIPATION
(1/2)**

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The extent to which people actively participate in a project determines the extent to which they are committed to it. The school that is committed to the education of youth would do well to accept and assimilate this fact and see that it is long-lasting. Participation that is freely and repeatedly exercised helps foster responsibility.

The teacher, besides being a doer, should see to it that his students are themselves doers: they should themselves discover and carry out activities which lead to knowledge; in cooperation with their teacher, they should also be responsible agents for academic programs. I will attempt in this paper to show how De La Salle used these very ideas in his schools.

Schools need to prepare students for critical thinking and active participation at various levels. In order to do this there is no better way than to train students in practical ways: this was the method De La Salle used from the very beginning. A quick glance at the pages of the "Conduct of Schools" will testify to this. I will divide this paper into two basic parts:

1. Frequent, changing and random participation throughout the academic day.
2. Regulated participation for specific times and activities in school life.

UNREGULATED PARTICIPATION

From the moment the Lasallian school opened its doors at 7:30 AM until they were closed at 4:30 PM, there was constant and active collaboration and participation on the part of the students in their school activities. This was true for each student in the school.

Students were permitted to enter the school one half-hour before the teacher arrived. The meticulous rules that governed this waiting period insured that order was maintained:

"The head teacher or inspector of schools will assign one of the most reliable pupils to observe those who

make noises while assembling. This pupil will merely observe without commenting at the time and will afterward tell the teacher what has happened, without the others' being aware of it" (Conduct, pp. 50-51).

The best way to avoid disorder in school is to fight against idleness; therefore, Lasallian students would review their lessons before class began so that the young ones would not waste time.

"the teacher will assign two students in the first class to teach about the alphabet and syllables" (page 52).

Class begins. The prayer is followed by a reading session during which students continually help the teacher. If one student does not know a letter, "the teacher will call on another who does know it" (page 70).

When a student mispronounces a syllable and does not correct himself, "the teacher will call on another to correct him" (page 119).

A little later on in the book, he defines the limits of student collaboration: "the teacher shall intervene only when no other student is able to assist his classmates" (page 124).

During breakfast and lunch students would review their lessons and their catechism; since the teacher had to take care of the general order of the classroom, "he will make use of a student who is appointed inspector" (page 15).

If a student needs to do penance for having been absent without permission, "a companion shall make him read" (page 198).

The arithmetic lesson is designed so that students mutually help one another, more than they do in the writing lesson. In the case of an incorrect answer, the teacher, "will call on another student in the same grade or in a more advanced grade to correct the student...and only after having called on several students who do not have the correct answer should the teacher himself give it" (page 73).

What teacher is there who has never had to collect objects that have nothing to do with the lesson at hand and that distract the students' attention? The Conduct points out: "that a student should collect these objects and take care of them until class is over and then give them to the teacher who will return them to their owners or do whatever is necessary with them" (p. 121).

In spite of the Conduct's recommendation that teachers should punish very little, if they want to

REGULATED PARTICIPATION

maintain order in school...the Conduct knows that they will have to do this from time to time but never during the catechism lesson, prayer recitation or during Mass. During these times, "he will assign a student to note behavior which is meriting of punishment and which will be administered at a later time" (p. 175).

When the teacher assigns students to their places, he will keep in mind the fact that they might be able to help each other. "The teacher will assign new students next to students who fulfill their duties well so that they might learn from them by example" (pp. 169 and 250).

When a student begins to read the syllables, "so that they learn how to follow while the others are reading, the teacher will assign him a companion when he feels it is necessary so that this one will teach the other student how to follow" (p. 35).

Seating among the writers follows similar lines: helping those who do not know how to write. "He will place, as far as possible, those students who need help next to a student who writes well so that the one can learn from the other" (page 253).

The cooperation that is suggested in the Conduct sometimes borders on the heroic: for example, when it suggests that they freely and conscientiously deny themselves promotion in order to "contribute to the progress of their fellow students and to the good order of the class".

Even after classes are over and outside of school the Conduct requires student cooperation. Since teachers cannot be vigilant on all the streets and squares when students are returning home or coming to school, "because the teacher can see only what is happening on the streets in the immediate vicinity of the school, the Director or the Inspector will assign some students to observe what is happening on other streets especially on the ones where several students live...and they shall report exactly what they have observed" (page 114).

The various places and circumstances described above clearly shows that the author of the Conduct prepared his teachers to demand the constant participation of his students in class. The advantages of this cooperation are many and are pointed out by De La Salle himself:

1. It keeps students attentive to the task at hand so that they are able to correct their companions.
2. It awakens and foster a desire for altruism in them due to the help that they give to the students who are most in need of it.
3. It creates an atmosphere of solidarity and fraternity within the classroom.
4. It supports the authority of the teacher since he does not have to speak or intervene often.

The kind of participation that we dealt with in the first part of this paper was the kind that was proper to specific contexts and norms but not to specific persons. In contrast, this second part of the paper deals with the type of participation proper to the designation and regimentation of certain academic responsibilities. The Conduct treats these in Chapter 8 of the second part entitled SCHOOL OFFICERS.

Here is the text of the introduction to Chapter 8:

"There will be several officers in the school, charged with various different functions which the teachers cannot do or ought not to do themselves. These officers are: 1. The reciters of prayers; 2. The substitute for the priest in the learning of questions and responses for Holy Mass; 3. The collector of mission offerings; 4. The aspergill bearer; 5. The keeper of rosaries and his assistants; 6. The bell ringer; 7. Inspectors and supervisors; 8. Row supervisors; 9. Visitors of the sick; 10. Distributors and collectors of papers; 11. Distributors and collectors of books; 12. Sweepers; 13. The doorkeeper; 14. The keeper of the key".

"The teacher will assign these tasks in each class during the first days after vacation. He will first consult with the Director or the Inspector and if it becomes necessary to change them or to change one of them, the nomination of another or others will be made in the same manner" (p. 207).

These responsibilities were of two kinds: some were limited to just one class while others included the entire school which was often composed of two or three classrooms. In the description of these officers, the Conduct offers these guidelines:

- * the scope of the responsibility;
- * the number of officers;
- * the tasks of the officers;
- * the duration of the responsibility;
- * qualities desirable in the officers;
- * regular rotation of the officers.

In order to summarize in just a few lines, for example, the twenty pages that the Conduct devotes to school officers, I have to leave out many informative and psychological details that illustrate the text so well. Nevertheless, I believe that I can show that De La Salle's schools were really arenas of responsible participation and participatory schools in the current meaning of the term.

And so I will profile each of the fourteen officers (there were actually more than this) article by article who participated in the running of De La Salle's schools.

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