

THE CONDUCT OF SCHOOLS**AN APPROACH TO TEACHING BASED ON
KNOWING ONE'S PUPILS***“Nosce te ipsum”*

Did St. John Baptist de La Salle know that “to teach John English you have to know John first”? Whether he did or not is not very important if his teaching methods were based on a thorough and detailed knowledge of each and every one of the pupils by the teacher. There is no mention in any of his writings of “differential psychology”, but the methods he used in class, the advice he gave to teachers, and the results he obtained (according to his biographers), show quite clearly that he thought a teacher ought to know his pupils well if he was to teach them well.

I have restricted myself on purpose in this article to the Conduct of Schools: it is not a closely reasoned and tightly structured pedagogical or psychological treatise, but rather a work which contains a core of intuitive perceptions which have been subsequently turned into a system and given names which are more or less intelligible to educational non-experts.

The Conduct of Schools can be viewed from two angles: its content and how this is expressed; in other words, what one aims to attain and the manner of doing so. This is not an area I can get involved with at the moment and I will leave for some other time an examination of underlying psychological presuppositions. Instead I shall speak briefly of the practical means used to get to know pupils personally and as separate individuals.

There is nothing fanciful about the titles given to the articles to be found in chapter III, part II: The School Register, The Register of Lesson Changes, The Register of the Qualities and Defects of Pupils. Our modern education gurus would, of course, use much more grandiose terms like registration, assessment, transfer, equal opportunity, medical opinion, course counselling and psychopedagogical imperatives etc. A brief survey of the articles mentioned earlier will demonstrate that they are as valid now as they have ever been.

THE SCHOOL REGISTER (Conduite, p. 133).

The title indicates clearly what is meant. There was one for each year. These registers were entered in turn into a main register. At the end of this register there was a list of all the pupils in alphabetical order. Pages 133 and 134 give clear instructions how registers should be set out. To give an idea of the psychological insight of these registers perhaps an actual example of a model register entry would be most effective:

August 31th MULOT - C (The C means he has been confirmed).

Jean Mulot joined the school on August 31th at the age of 16. He had been confirmed two years previously. Began receiving Communion last Easter. Son of Joseph Mulot, textile worker. Address: rue de Contray, St. Stephen's Parish, at Croix d'Or. Lives over the shop.

Was classed third in Writing, first in Politeness. Due in school at 9,0am and 3,0pm. Was taught two years by Mr Caba in the school on St. Stephen's Street, 8 months by Mr Ralot, a year by Mr Huysbecq and 4 months by Mr Mulot the schoolmaster. After that his parents took him away thinking he would do better elsewhere.

He has difficulty in concentrating. He is absent about twice a month –helping his mother. He does not work hard, but does not find learning difficult. He has rarely missed being promoted. He knows his catechism but not very much his prayers. He is a habitual liar and glutton. He is not particularly pious and has no idea of recollection. He was absent from school for three months during the winter, and he finally left school for good August 31st 1706 to train as a sculptor, or to be a foot servant, or something else...

If you simply changed a few words, made the report sound a bit more modern, you could probably ask your school psychologist if his present day file records were any improvement on the one quoted above. The reader himself, I am sure, can draw his own –many– conclusions.

THE REGISTER OF LESSON CHANGES (pp. 133...)

These were kept by school inspectors who were in charge of “lesson changes”. Their function was to keep a check on pupils' progress in reading, writing, counting etc. Each subject has as many registers as there were “lessons” or levels of attainment. There is a model example of such a register on page 135 of the “Conduct”:

WRITING REGISTER (stage 3)

January 1st	Jacques Maturin	April 2nd
March 1st	Hubert Valle	June 3rd
May 2nd	François Duterioux	July 6th
June 1st	Nicolas Paulet	August 1st
July 1st	Louis Adam Rive	October 1st
August 2nd	Jean Grimoire	November 2nd
October 1st	Philippe Le Gendre	December 1st
November 2nd	Pierre Le Large	February 2nd

The dates indicate when each pupil began and completed the third stage in writing. Each "lesson" had three stages.

REGISTER OF CLASS SECTIONS (pp. 136...).

It was the job of the school inspector to see that every teacher had this register on the first of each month. There was very little of any interest for the psychologist in these registers as they contained only the times pupils were late, absent with or without leave, or unable to recite their catechism.

REGISTER OF THE QUALITIES AND DEFECTS OF PUPILS (p. 236).

These registers give an extraordinarily deep insight into the characters of pupils and their consequent behaviour. Keeping registers such as these implied constant and meticulous observation of pupils on the part of teachers. During the last month of the school year, the teacher would draw up a profile of each of his pupils, noting all the positive and negative things he had noticed about him during the course of the year. These profiles he would hand over to the Brother Director who would pass them on to the teacher taking these pupils the following year, but only for the first term. At this point the latter had to start making his own observations so as to be able to draw up his own profiles at the end of the year. When a teacher kept the same class for two years running because of staff changes, the register would be kept by the Brother Director. A comparison of the registers of successive years enabled the school inspector to get a clear idea of what the pupils were like and of the powers of observation of the teachers... When a teacher did not know how to write up these profiles, the Director or inspector would either help him or do it for him.

Probably an actual example of one of these profiles would give a better idea than any more description:

François de Terieux, 8 1/2 years old, has been coming to school for 2 years now. He has been on level 3 of Writing since July 1st last. He finds it difficult to concentrate. He is not very pious and cannot keep still in church or during prayers unless you keep an eye on him. He does this through an inability to keep his mind on things. His main defect is a lack of concentration. He is quite a willing lad but you have to win him over to get him to behave. Punishing him makes no difference as it does not register. He has been rarely absent from school, but he has been so sometimes without permission, having met up with some rascal friend of his and because he is easily led. He has often come late for school. He does not work hard: often he just looks around and has a rest if you do not keep an eye on him. He learns easily but he has missed being promoted twice from level 2 to level 3 through not working. He knows his prayers well. He will accept being told off by teachers who have authority but will be uncooperative with those who have none. All the same, he has not got a difficult character: if you win him over he will do anything for you. His parents love him and do not like to see him punished. He has never been given any post of responsibility because he is not very able. He is alert and could do well if he did not come late so often.

We may well ask if any of our files contain profiles as complete as this one.

HEAD OF ROW REGISTER (p. 238).

ABSENTEES REGISTER (p. 239).

The Head of Row Register, as the name implies, was kept up to date by a pupil who sat at the end of the row. He would mark down those who came late or were absent. In the Absentees Register were listed all the absent pupils who lived in the same part of town as the pupil in charge of checking up on them. The information contained in these registers was not particularly significant from a psychological point of view but provided an important element for the personal profiles.

These examples taken from the Conduct of Schools illustrate the extent to which St. La Salle and his first Brothers were keen on knowing their pupils as well as possible. Only ignorance or prejudice could lead anyone to believe that those who came before us treated their pupils as mass produced clones.

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