

CHAPTER 5 OF THE CONDUCT OF SCHOOLS: A DRAMATIC DIALOGUE

In Chapter 5 of the *Conduct of Schools* De La Salle is at grips with the major pedagogical problem of the 17th century: teacher cruelty. Canon Blain tells us in the *Life of John Baptist De La Salle* that De La Salle's ambitious intention was to eliminate all forms of corporal punishment from the schools, a formidable task, I might add, at a time when the paternal swat was considered the beginning of pedagogy.

Blain also tells us that De La Salle during his lifetime was not successful in eliminating corporal punishment from the schools because the teachers were not ready to do so. They were so threatened by the possibility of losing their authority in the classroom, that they could not relinquish the security of the ferule. Regarding the elimination of corporal punishment in the classroom, De La Salle had to engage in a patient, political, lifelong program of persuasion with his teachers. Like a good administrator, he accepted the teachers where they were, and he worked patiently to wean them away from their reliance upon corporal punishment. De La Salle understood the teachers' insecurity and resistance, and he accepted whatever changes of moderation and limitation that were possible. It took until 1860, 141 years after the death of De La Salle, before the Brothers finally eliminated all mention of corporal punishment from the *Conduct of Schools*.

It is an historical tragedy stemming from a superficial reading by historians of education of Chapter 5, the longest chapter in the *Conduct of Schools*, that De La Salle's approach to the elimination of corporal punishment has been misunderstood. The length of Chapter 5 has been mistakenly interpreted by some historians as a confirmation that De La Salle as well as his teachers were obsessed with corporal punishment. It is my belief that such a misreading has been due to the failure to recognize the chapter's dialogical structure and the concomitant failure to identify what is said by De La Salle and what is said by the teachers.

Ironically, De La Salle's approach to the elimination of corporal punishment as expressed in Chapter 5 is probably the most realistic and humane presentation on correction written by a practising primary school educator in 17th-century France. Chapter 5 is a pedagogical treasure, a gem in the history of discipline in education. In Chapter 5 De La Salle's pedagogical genius is at its best, and what he has to say about classroom correction and "kids at risk" has value for teachers today.

Without being theatrical Chapter 5 is a subtly staged dialogue in which the moderating views of De La Salle alternate with and respond to the needs and demands of the teachers to hang on to the traditional means of correction. Based upon the text of De La Fontainerie's English translation of the *Conduct of Schools* (McGraw-Hill, 1935) a counting of the positions identified as taken by the teachers totals approximately ten pages; a counting of the responses identified

as De La Salle's totals approximately 22 pages. Chapter 5 of the *Conduct of Schools* is the best example in all the writings of De La Salle illustrating the painful reality of his role as collaborator in the pedagogical formation of the teachers. The objective of this article is to outline the script of the painful dialogue between De La Salle and the teachers in Chapter 5.

Script of the Dialogue between De La Salle and the Teachers

De La Salle: (Introduction, four pages) **The principal cause of student misbehavior: the teacher**

The Introduction to Chapter 5 is not in the 1706 manuscript of the *Conduct of Schools*. De La Salle added this long introduction prior to the 1720 printed edition in order to strengthen and focus his position regarding corporal punishment vis-a-vis the teachers. De La Salle sets the stage by posing a dilemma in terms that are meaningful and challenging to the teachers: How can a teacher obtain classroom order and discipline without alienating the students? Then De La Salle, front and center, presents the model teacher as one who combines firmness with gentleness and follows with the lengthy claim that the cause of student misbehavior is the unbearable and weak teacher. Typical lines:

"... first the necessity of joining gentleness to firmness in the guidance of children must be explained."

"What must be done in order that firmness may not degenerate into harshness, and gentleness into weakness?"

(Summary) The unbearable teacher is rigorous and lacks discretion; domineering and impatient; demanding and nagging; unreasonable and unwilling to listen; unfair; insensitive.

(Summary) The weak teacher is neglectful; lax on regulations; familiar; frivolous. He fails to follow through; shows favoritism; lacks conviction or feeling.

Teachers: (Article 1, four pages) **The traditional kinds of correction**

The defensive demands of the teachers dominate this response. The teachers insist upon a description of the kinds of correction they have traditionally relied upon: reprimand, strap, rod, expulsion, and penance. The 1706 manuscript of *Conduct of Schools* had included the whip, but by the time of the 1720 edition De La Salle had succeeded in getting the teachers to drop it. De La Salle makes three interventions in the teachers' presentation: he makes the startling recommendation that reprimands not be used; he gets the teachers to agree to a limited and minimal number of blows; and he puts off talking about penance, which "has special utility," until the end of Chapter 5. Typical lines:

"When a teacher has threatened the pupils with something, and one of them commits the fault on account of which they have been threatened, he must be punished."

"The ferule may be used on several occasions: 1. For not following the lesson or for fooling around. 2. For coming late to school. 3. For not obeying at the first sign; and for several other similar faults."

According to our custom, the rod may be used: 1. For not being willing to obey. 2. For habitually not following the lesson or not studying. 3. For scribbling instead of writing. 4. For fighting in school or on the streets. 5. For not praying in church. 6. For not behaving at Mass or during catechism. 7. For missing Mass or catechism on Sunday."

De La Salle: (Articles 2, 3, 4. seven pages) The moderation and restriction of correction

De La Salle goes into a lengthy monologue regarding the moderation, limitation and eventual elimination of corporal punishment. The monologue is broken up into three "scenes." In the first "scene" De La Salle counsels the teachers to avoid corporal punishment by critiquing the source of the disorder; by creating non-punitive means of keeping order; by consulting beforehand with the school principal.

In the second "scene" De La Salle describes the "ideal" punishment which fulfills ten "ideal" conditions: seven of which apply to the teacher; two apply to the student; one applies to both. De La Salle probably had his tongue in cheek during this "scene," knowing that the ten "ideal" conditions in reality eliminate corporal punishment.

In the third "scene" De La Salle describes the ten worst faults committed in administering corporal punishment. Again, and the implication is clear, if the faults are avoided, corporal punishment becomes practically non-existent.

In the monologue De La Salle uses his strongest language in Chapter 5 against corporal punishment, and he makes very specific limitations and restrictions against its usage. De La Salle comes through as an administrator who is in touch with his teachers and on top of the problem. Typical lines:

"... in a good school punishments must be rare..."

"To avoid punishments which are a source of great disorder in a school, it is necessary to note well that it is silence, self-control, and vigilance on the part of the teacher that establish and maintain good order in a class, and not harshness and blows."

(Summary) The ten conditions are: on the part of teacher: charitable, just, proportioned to the fault, moderate, calm, prudent, and not administered for offenses taken personally; on part of the student: accepted and respectful; on the part of both: silent.

(Summary): The ten worst faults are: harmful, useless, impulsive, disturbing to the class, antagonizing other students, using disrespectful words, brought on by displeasure with the student or his parents, done in an indecorous manner, not approved by school policy, and not approved for the particular teacher.

Teachers: (Article 5, two pages) The serious offenses deserving punishment

The teachers respond by listing the five most serious offenses which they righteously demand deserve corporal punishment and which they defensively maintain can only be controlled by corporal punishment. It must have been very difficult for De La Salle to compromise and to let the teachers have their say in this matter. Typical lines:

"There are five vices which must not ordinarily be pardoned: lying, fighting, theft, impurity and indecorum in church."

De La Salle: (Sections 1, 2, 3, 4. six pages) Understanding problem children

De La Salle immediately steps forward as a "psychologist" and in the same article delivers, in pre-scientific terms of course, a touching treatise on the types and treatment of "children at risk." He analyzes the etiology of the plight of poor children; he explains how parental neglect, deprived family conditions and social background account for student misbehavior. He recommends appropriate ways of dealing with various types of problem children. At this point in the exchange regarding the etiology of student misbehavior, De La Salle, the teacher of teachers, is at his peak.

School psychologists and counselors today would undoubtedly applaud De La Salle's delivery as a precursor to their undertaking. The reader with further interest in this matter should refer to Brother Othmar Wurth's in-depth study of De La Salle's analysis of troubled children in *John Baptist De La Salle and Special Education*, (Saint Mary's Press, 1988).

In a short peroration (Section 4) De La Salle warns the teachers against the dangers of accusations made against students, and he prescribes ways of dealing with the accusations fairly and justly. Typical lines:

"There are some children to whose conduct their parents pay very little attention – sometimes none at all."

"These faults do not come from an evil disposition of heart or mind, but from their having been left to themselves."

"... it would ordinarily be more to the purpose not to correct him, but to pretend not to notice it when he does not study or fails to do his duty."

"If they have a haughty spirit, give them some charge in the school... If they are thoughtless, show them affection... and place them between two students of sedate disposition."

"Do not require of them what is beyond their capacity... and be satisfied with the little progress that they make."

Teachers: (Articles 6 and 7. four pages) The administration of punishment

One would expect by this time that the teachers would have been won over by De La Salle to less violent means of correction. Quite the contrary! At this juncture the teachers wanted their "right" to the use of corporal punishment spelled out in detail as to when, where and how it should be administered. One might also justifiably expect by this time that De La Salle would have lost patience with the teachers. But he had not. De La Salle sympathized with their deep insecurities, and he understood how hard it is for the teachers to risk giving up "their hold over the class." So De La Salle goes along with the description of the administration of corporal punishment in school, patiently tempering and restricting the unpleasant details. Typical lines:

"When the teacher wishes to give the ferule to a pupil... he will indicate with the point of the signal the rule which the pupil has violated... The pupil will go to the teacher, make the Sign of the Cross and hold out his hand... If when the teacher wishes to make the pupil hold out his hand, he meets with resistance, he will make a sign to the pupil to go to the place where punishment (with the rod) is administered... there he will prepare himself in such a manner that he may not appear indecently."

De La Salle: (Article 8, five pages) Penance and De La Salle's recommendation

Tired but not discouraged in his efforts to "convert" his teachers from corporal punishment, De La Salle comes back to his recommended method of correction: namely, penance and its explanation which he had postponed earlier. In this last effort in Chapter 5 to get rid of corporal punishment from the schools, De La Salle attempts to convince the teachers of the preventive, corrective and exemplary advantages of using a variety of forms of penances as effective alternatives to corporal punishment. De La Salle's final recommendation to his teachers in this dramatic dialogue is the closing line:

"The most appropriate penance and the one that is of the greatest utility is to give the pupils something to learn by heart."

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