

A LASALLIAN APPROACH TO THE CHALLENGE OF RIGHTS FOR EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Lasallian Educational Observatory for the Rights of Children and Youth
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ABSTRACT

The issue of rights was raised as an essential element in continuing the Lasallian tradition in the development of universal and gratuitous education by De La Salle and the first Brothers. This new perspective today includes reflection on the forms of executing rights in education, including good treatment, integral protection and education in citizenship for a productive social, political life; these elements are in dialogue with and are intertwined with the tradition of Lasallian thought in education.

Key Words: Rights of the Child, Lasallian Tradition, an Approach to Rights

Introduction

The Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools came into being and developed over time with an irrevocable commitment to education and to children, adolescents and to those living in poverty. Three centuries of membership, seeking to provide solutions and to contribute to integrated formation and social transformation in different areas of the world are evidence of this. Starting from this perspective, one of the paths that has been taking shape in discussions on the future of the Lasallian vision and mission is to translate the founding spirit in a relevant, innovative, effective and efficient way, in tune with the times, contextual requirements, and the needs of society, as stated in the Rule of the Brothers, number 11: *"The Institute is concerned above all for the educational needs of the poor as they strive to become aware of their dignity and to live to be recognized as human beings and children of God. The Institute establishes, renews and diversifies its works according to what the kingdom of God requires."*

In this framework, one of the aspects that been reflected on with more force since the time of Brother John Johnston is that of building an approach to rights that will strengthen the view and understanding of reality that will be relevant in Lasallian education, as well as incorporating elements to radiate the educational and social management of its works. These intentions have given expression to various communiques, texts, meetings, programs and most recently in Latin America, the PERLA program and the creation of the Lasallian Educational Observatory for the rights of children and youth.

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In this sense, this article attempts to sketch some of the central reflections that have been put forward on the research level by the Observatory regarding the implications of an approach to rights in the Lasallian vision and mission and the general lines towards an integral management that will make this possible.

1. *Implications of an approach to rights in the Lasallian vision and mission*

1.1 *The seeds of the right to an education in the origin of the Lasallian enterprise.*

To think of the Lasallian enterprise from its beginnings and its reason for existence is to place ourselves in its Mission: to education in a human and Christian manner in and for life. This was the idea of the Founder, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, in the French context of the 17th century where, in a way parallel to his spiritual outlook, he thought of education *as a need and requirement for preparation for life in this world, especially as a means for exercising a profession* (Hengemüle, 2009, page 22). This idea was also focused on thinking about education which was centered in children and adolescents as the primary subjects of education with particular emphasis on the poor in society. This is how we can identify a founding spirit that was avant garde for its time with education in the "Christian Schools," elements that today are understood and very much wanted by nations, from an approach to rights.

More than 300 years ago De La Salle was already defending and practicing universal education. *His formation in the cultural context in which he lived did not allow him to speak about education as a human right, an anthropological requirement for respect for human dignity and the global development of humankind, nor about the social rights of citizens as an imperative for their inclusion in society* (Hengemüle, 2009, page 22) and we can further place ourselves in the context of his time:

The 17th century is the century of instruction...under Louis XIV, whose government corresponds to time when De La Salle lived, instruction was spreading and becoming more democratic. The great century had as its original school doctrine: the doctrine of school for everyone, gratuitous and for the poor. There was even the legal obligation to attend school. By his declaration of December 13, 1698, the king prohibited employing workers under the age of 14, treating them as new Catholics, for the simple reason that they had to attend school (Hengemüle, page 12).

In fact, many of the ideas of that time were taken, enriched, and implemented by De La Salle's community. Some of these ideas would only come to be thought of as rights some 300 years later. It is as if De La Salle welcomed gratuitousness and quality human and Christian formation, especially of poor children, in an attempt to achieve universal education.

Gratuity. De La Salle considered this a fundamental principle of his schools because he accepted this as a quality of salvation that God offered to men and women (Romans 3: 14); it was like a condition for those who are dedicated to apostolic tasks (Matthew 10: 8); and it was a kind of characteristic of offering oneself and gifts received (1 Peter 4: 10). Therefore, he sees and wants gratuity as an attitude of mind and practice for his religious teachers. And he wants them to be gratuitous in materials, affectivity and in spirituality (Hengemüle, 2009, page 25). This gratuitous material is essential for De La Salle and it involves the very definition of his religious-educational Institute, the definition presented in the first article of the Common Rule: *the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools is a society in which members profess to keep schools gratuitously.*

The concept of gratuity meant that everyone would have free access to it, especially the poor, while maintaining its status as a public school. Nevertheless, from 1704 to 1706 Lasallian schools legally lost the right to be "public," that is to say, to be open to all. But in spite of this, the decision was made to ensure their gratuitous nature, as well as the quality human and Christian formation, focused on knowledge of the student. So the idea that "the school runs well" needs to have the tools so that this can happen. One of these tools was the personal assessment of the students, which was recorded in the school records designed for this purpose and contained in the Conduct of Schools.

In this sense, knowledge of the student was accompanied by a curricular program that allowed him to advance rapidly and to prepare himself for the challenges of society and that helped him to develop the different dimensions of his person – cognitive (mathematics, language), spiritual (Catechism), and social (Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility) (Hengemüle, 2003, page 85). The curriculum was developed by the simultaneous method and by level differentiation of the progress of the children. The success of the school was so great that proposals for foundations arrived from many places, especially from the middle class who saw in the school a way forward towards social advancement.

This Lasallian idea is plainly visible in almost identical form, much later, in article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states: 1) "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages..." 2) "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms..." Also in the Declaration of the Rights of a Child, article 7 states: "The child is entitled to receive education, which shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages. He shall be given an education which will promote his general culture and enable him, on a basis of equal opportunity, to develop his abilities, his individual judgement, and his sense of moral and social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society (...) society and the public authorities shall endeavor to promote the enjoyment of this right."

One could argue that De La Salle's thinking in his own day is still valid today, since he was concerned that all children and young people have the right to an education, a free, quality education, appropriate so that the living conditions of children and adolescents are improved, preparing them for life in society, political life and productivity, key elements that contribute to reducing poverty and eradicating inequality and exclusion.

This aspect is a key one when you consider that this intention which came into being from the vision and mission of a congregation devoted to education in these terms, became an imperative on the ethical-political world level, starting from the promulgation of Human Rights and of the Rights of the Child; nevertheless, this requires that it be taken up in an integral manner by nations, educational institutions and by society in general. This is the path to be consolidated in a globalized world, where there is tension in the discourse of rights and educational policies within neoliberal approaches that are concerned about scientific cognitive development, productivity and competition, forgetting about the subject of education and the impact of the context in which he lives has on his development to have access to and to find within the educational process, answers, support and meaning to guide his life program in the midst of difficulties, unemployment, violence and inequality.

It is precisely this aspect that makes a human rights approach indispensable in educational programs to build programs that are in harmony with the ethical-political character of the program itself, an irreplaceable struggle for a better world for boys and girls and humankind in general. It is precisely in education where there is the opportunity to radiate new ways of relating with one another, learning to

think, be, know, do, while strengthening an ethic that opts for universal values, rights, freedom, equality, solidarity, cultural identity, thus ensuring its survival as well as reflection and future projection derived from it.

1.2 *The Lasallian encounter with the right to education at the present time.*

To understand education as a public good, an opportunity for development and as a right is to accept the elements that constitute it as basic lines for carrying it out. This analysis is not a simple one, for Lasallians it involves having ethical, political, academic and spiritual criteria. Those aspects require articulation between the principles proper to education, between the spirit of the congregation and the content. In a special way these are found established in international norms on the right to education and in some of the documents of the United Nations. In particular, it is worth highlighting the reports of Katarina Tomasevski, who was the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Her experience served in differentiating four components of this right, known as "the four A's": affordability, accessibility, adaptability, and acceptability.

Affordability has to do with the ability to satisfy the educational demand, whether public or private. *Accessibility* involves facilitating the conditions for entrance in cultural and material terms, free from discrimination and exclusion. *Adaptability* has to do with the need to organize and develop educational processes that are user-friendly, safe and wholesome and that are relevant for the students who are being educated. *Acceptability* expresses the quality of the process achieved by the other components but above all by the legitimacy of the educational process for all those involved in it. This achievement is identified as quality education; it integrates the result of a complete range of aspects that have to do with good treatment, care, protection, the guarantee of rights and the development of teaching models that take into account democratic and deliberative environments.

Given the fact that the essence of the right to education is something that is well deserved and not something that is bought in the market, the rationality it requires is defined in the educational program of a country, an educational institution, involving purposes that need to be strengthened from the perspective of the right to education, rights in education, and education in rights. In this sense, it is important to study this topic as a function of the progressive changes of the state as an educating agent, the policies that are being directed by international agencies that have generated a scenario of tensions between conservative and transformational trends that are under discussion in terms of defending traditions, counteracting the standardization of culture, and resisting the development of knowledge in unconditional service of the market and the globalized world.

There is one of the principal Lasallian challenges in the post modern world, to go from an origin that dealt with knowledge as a journey of the dignity of childhood and adolescence and preventing its exploitation, to a humanistic, integrated education of a citizen for life, in society and with productivity in terms of equality, social justice and solidarity. The central point is the achieving of standards of quality and competition, without allowing knowledge to become just merchandise. "If post industrial society and post modern culture have changed the nature of knowledge, and if this has become a determining factor in the reproduction of capital, then educational institutions will regain their importance and teachers, teaching and popular knowledge, for example, will acquire power, because they are part of the problem, and in this sense they are an opportunity to play with" (Álvarez, 2010, page 146). Everything, Álvarez states, serves to redefine the role of educational institutions, teachers, pedagogy and in that way give an opening to education that will debate between inequality and the

market place and it will constitute an alternative for social transformation and citizen empowerment as these societal trends are faced.

This scenario involves a political tension between fine-tuning institutions that are in processes of competition, effectiveness, and profitability without losing the essence of a liberal education. From this narrative, looking at education as a right, you can adopt a stance for the obligations proposed by Tomasevski, so that these are established as a state, organizational and institutional policy imperative in terms of education. Nevertheless, to ensure the realization of these aspects, you need to strongly opt for a life program free from the colonization of thinking on the part of utilitarian interests of the market place and, in this program, the Lasallian journey has history, memory, word and social and political sensibility in its favor, and this will allow it to take on the current challenges to work based on a rights approach which the congregational spirit has entrusted to it.

2. General lines towards an integrated rights approach

2.1 Principles and lines of action for a Lasallian approach to rights

In the line of argument we are advancing, there are basic principles of the right to an education in addition to the four A's that we spoke of earlier: the *care* of girls and boys and adolescents based on an ethic of state, societal and educational institutions co-responsibility; *good treatment* from the approach of cordial justice; *integrated protection* when facing threats, at-risk situations and abuse; a *guarantee of the rights* of the child: survival, protection, development and participation; *education for citizenship* in terms of values, rights, plurality, democracy and inter-cultural awareness; finally, *formation for a productive life*.

In this context, *care and good treatment* for children sets up a challenge which is not unusual in the Lasallian enterprise, given that in its educational practice this principle has been engraved in its very reason for being, in the axis of meaning of what it does; from there, it gives faith to a commitment, it responds to a call, keeping its promise where the good of the other is sought: "*Boy, girl, adolescent,*" which requires translation into good living, a good life, facilitating the building up of knowledge, values, attitudes and abilities for living, producing, being happy and responsible for their own development and that of the society to which they belong. Therefore, Lasallian principles enter into dialogue with philosophic, juridical, political and productive options imposed by the current state of affairs, generating a window of opportunity to consolidate the educational program and to present them as an option for the organizational identity for the defense of the quality of education with the focus on rights, development and plurality.

In analyzing the Lasallian responsibility in this context, it can be observed that it is off-center of a Kantian rational approach, and it resembles more the idea of Levinas (2001), related to bear with other's needs, requests, defenselessness, which includes the following ideas: when we approach the face of the other, in this case, that of children and adolescents, we feel their expectant and vulnerable looks in terms of adult responsibility and that of society; we can no longer live for themselves, nor can we postpone the search for their well-being and integral development. This is precisely one of the conditions that contribute to the Lasallian enterprise, to found the guarantee for rights starting from recognizing and sensing the other not only as a legitimate other, but also as the origin of the activity, the motivation for dedication to their cause; a condition without which, in the case of the rights of children, its realization would be weak and incomplete.

To include the *guarantee of rights* goes beyond treating the other as a subject where children are the priority. Here what obliges is the inherent value of the child, adolescent, subject, that deserves, requires and depends on adult, teacher, family, social organizations and state responsibility. When the Congregation in this sense accompanies the life of another, it seeks to educate in a human and liberal sense and this practice can only be done in the framework of relationships, otherness, solidarity, example and pedagogical ambience that is proper to democracy, justice and the guarantee of rights.

In educational practice, we move to accompanying the students in their transition to adulthood, being radically involved in their search for well-being, protection, development, which is possible in a rights-based approach which observes and then obtains in an integrated manner all the necessary elements, related to what has been proposed in the Convention on the Rights of a Child in terms of survival, protection, development and participation. These considerations on the Lasallian tradition in facing the challenges of education involve a rights-based approach and it creates space strengthening its activities. This approach allows itself to be affected by the other, it requires being able to offer more and better options in vanquishing vulnerability and needs.

In this perspective, a Lasallian school or social work that welcomes children and adolescents is more given to take a step so that their rights are realized. In that way, the lines of action are priorities that contribute, first of all, to a safe *survival* and a healthy and dignified existence: eradicating hunger, poor nutrition, health and life risks.

Secondly, a *protection-based* approach must be taken, which integrates the overall set of actions in terms of protecting children and adolescents against abuse, exploitation, drugs and discrimination; practices of protection that include civil registration, observation and performance in situations of exposure, maltreatment, violence as well as inclusion and welcoming when these children come from situations where they are displaced due to human or natural disasters.

Thirdly, *development* enables education for inter-cultural socializing, pluralism, the care for private and public goods where the exercise of freedom and the building up of ability is taken up as cornerstones of achievement.

Finally, *participation* includes actions that lead to legitimate social and political processes in and from Lasallian works, stimulating free thought, expression, access to information, association, playing the lead role in issues that require collective decisions in actions that involve oversight, consensus, cooperation, etc.

De La Salle's original concern was for the salvation of children and adolescents by taking them away from the exploitation and poverty in which they lived; and for the Lasallian enterprise today, it is the same saving sense in terms of political emancipation, it is offering them more and better options than those offered them today by being seduced by the market place, hedonism, being trained to produce and consume. This is possible by focusing on *education for citizenship* and training for a *productive life* in terms of dignity and equality. It is again significant the way in which the founding Lasallian milestone that perceived the threats of labor exploitation in terms of children and the education of his time; it constitutes a modern version, in proportional relationship to all the techniques of consumerism, the modern forms of exploitation and the great many threats and risks for children and adolescents today, where they are vulnerable no matter their social class, race or culture.

Three centuries ago, De La Salle postulated: *If the parents take their small children out of the schools so that they can work when they still are not sufficiently instructed, it is necessary to show them that they will cause them great harm...it is necessary to show them how important it is for an artisan to know how to read and write. Even if they have little intelligence, if they know how to read and write they will be capable of doing anything* (Hengemüle, 2009, page 33). It is here where De La Salle again shows himself to be a visionary in his opposition to children becoming under-age workers, leaving school prematurely for this reason, an infringement of rights that continues today in different areas of the world.

In looking for references in the Convention on the Rights of the Child we find the following: *States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development* (Article 32, 1989). De La Salle goes even further and observes that inadequate teaching practices become another reason for absenteeism from school, leading him to think about the need to train the teacher and to write *"The Conduct of the Christian Schools"* (1720). He establishes a pedagogical plan for teachers (Third Section in the Conduct) and he creates the normal schools for rural teachers, seeking to see that teachers develop adequate and appealing practices for students.

This aspect refers to another great lesson learned by the Lasallian enterprise and it consists in the awareness of sensitizing and training the teacher in the principles of otherness with the students: *In imitation of the great Apostle, you must encourage them to live in a manner worthy of God, because God has called them to his kingdom and his glory. Your zeal must go so far in this that to achieve it, you are ready to give your very life, so dear to you are the children entrusted to you* (Meditation 198.2). Today, this sensitizing involves obligations based on the framework of rights, where not just training in good treatment, care and effective teaching is called for but also for the promotion of and respect for rights in all academic and social relationships.

Faced with the relevance and quality of education, De La Salle concerned himself with thinking about school made to order for poor children and young people. The Common Rules, in fact, speak about the Lasallian school existing to give students the education appropriate for them (RC 1.3) and this is what the parents want for their children and that is why the founder raised the issue of the Directors of the schools, in speaking with the parents about a child who is to enter the school, speak to the parents about *what they plan to do with the child, if they want him to learn a trade and in what amount of time* (GE 22.2.3). Also this is the kind of education students want for themselves, they devise a teaching practice accommodated to the needs of the students. *De La Salle and the first Brothers achieved a miracle for the era, that the children loved the school and wanted to stay in it* (Hengemüle, 2009, page 37).

This charism allows for what today is known as adaptability, a complex concept in the current context of education and tensions are present in facing educational policies that tend to omit these aspects to focus on the achievement of cognitive aspects for competition in the world of production and in the market place. Endomarketing (internal marketing). De La Salle opted for a positive, pleasant school, made to order for the students, accentuating the school space for its safety, cordiality and the training it offered.

What is valuable about this posture is that it was positive and it focused on the well-being of the child and it reflected in many ways the concern for education at this life stage and, on the other hand, it

significantly reduced the number of students who left school and illiteracy of the time. In this respect, De La Salle said:

The need for this Institute is very great, since it is the artisans and the poor who are very little instructed, as they are occupied all day with earning a living for themselves and their children, they cannot give them the instruction they need, an honest and Christian education (RC 1.4).

In this same perspective CEPAL and UNICEF raise the issue: "The full right to quality education and belonging is an essential condition for overcoming poverty and advancing towards greater equality of opportunities" (2006). Rising education levels, especially among the poor, as well as the reduction in gender gaps, would increase social mobility and raise labor returns and the quality of human resources. At the same time they would allow for the democratization of full access towards citizenship. It is in this idea and in others where the distance between what De La Salle proposed in his time and the universal right to education does not agree at all. Building a better future as a product of better education was his central option.

This involves a central and ongoing dynamic of nation states, societies, institutions and organizations of this type, particularly those that are concerned with education as a mission that transcends strictly cognitive objectives and is concerned about the subjects themselves and the complex unequal groups in society that are recognized as dependent, vulnerable, poor, marginalized, excluded and in difficulty.

If the context has changed since the founding idea, the central objectives of the Lasallian mission have remained the same and the current challenges are even deeper ones, presented by a panorama in which problems and needs experienced in childhood and adolescence still have traits such as those that motivated the educational and social work originally; furthermore, they are diversified and made more complex in a globalized world, marked not only by poverty but also by violence, discrimination and a market-centered life, hedonism and individualism.

This is how actions that originated with traits of welfare, charity, selfless service, opting for education for life, and work – these are maintained and they need to go forward in plans which education and social education require today with co-responsibility, co-management, sustainability, competitiveness, among families, organizations and the State.

This element involves going from looking upon students as dependent beings, prone to indiscretions, to recognizing them and treating them as persons with rights in the educational process, subject to the right of education and protagonists themselves of education in and for human rights in school and social life. This aspect introduces a substantial change in De La Salle's vision and mission while keeping the founding principles, it incorporates reading those principles in terms of rights in order to position policies, programs and discussions in the analytical field that will incorporate anthropological, theological, educational and philosophical components with those that have served education, the socio-juridical and policy component in its plans and developments.

2.2 *Central strategies to be promoted*

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In accordance with what has already been said, the following are proposed as central aspects to be developed in order to guarantee an integral management of rights:

- The rights-based approach should be visible and fundamental in the vision and mission of Districts and Lasallian works, so that they are set up in a radical way in educational processes.
- The rights of children and adolescents are required to be formulated in terms of paths and lines of action in educational programs.
- An integrated management of rights means that the rights themselves are constituted in carrying out administrative, academic and social management.
- To move forward in this way in the Lasallian enterprise means to develop and improve processes of observation in the context of the situations of children and adolescents in term of the way they live out their rights. This approach brings with it to idea of learning to do research and to plan its management, having rights as central axes that are converted into indicators for action and assessment.
- Observing how to plan, execute and evaluate the commitments for quality Lasallian education becomes the central axis for congregational educational management for the 21st century.
- In addition, training in terms of rights needs to be strengthened; this training would be aimed at teachers and students at all educational levels, wherever the Lasallian enterprise is fostered.
- While generating a movement in favor of the rights of children and adolescents in Lasallian educational works, this approach will also allow for guiding research processes and working in a network in its organizational structure. Sharing comparative studies, significant successful experiences, areas of assessment, discussion and planning.
- In this sense the impact goes back to the continuity of the Lasallian work and its impact in world and regional educational policies.

By way of conclusion

In summary, starting from the structural ideas of Lasallian education such as: gratuity, persuasion, appealing schools and teachers, effective and appropriate instruction, group instruction and endomarketing (internal marketing) – it can be stated that the visionary thinking of De La Salle and the first Brothers constituted the basis for the renewal of the meaning of their work over time. From all this follows a call to Lasallians of the 21st century to fight and to carry out a rights-based approach to education, rights to an education and education in rights. To do this, the rights-based approach is required in the congregational vision and mission; to develop administrative, academic and social processes, while broadening academic scenarios and offerings as well as policy lines in this direction. This brings with it new meaning to advance the encounter between Lasallian spiritual principles and ethical and political rights, to a co-responsibility with the state, society and educational institutions committed to the care, good treatment, protection, the assurance rights, and comprehensive civic, cultural and productive training for children and adolescents. By developing these, Lasallian education

will continue to re-create its memory and essence, while strengthening its history and its role in the world.

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Abreviaturas de las Obras de San Juan Bautista de La Salle utilizadas:

GE Guía de las Escuelas

MF Meditaciones para las principales fiestas del año

RC Reglas comunes de los Hermanos de las Escuelas Cristianas

RU Reglas de cortesía y urbanidad cristianas