

CAN WE SPEAK OF "LASALLIAN PEDAGOGY" TODAY?

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with an open discussion concerning the situation of Lasallian pedagogy as discourse that involves consistent scientific rationale. Rather than giving answers, the author raises questions and offers criteria for stimulating a re-reading of the educational tradition inherited more than three-hundred years ago. Based on an open discussion about the epistemological statute of pedagogy, he tries to understand "Lasallian" starting from a consideration of a scientific rationale committed to the construction of historical projects with a clear humanizing intention based on faith. The questions remain open and the discussion is open to continuing.

Key words: scientific rationale, epistemology, Lasallian pedagogy, project, memory

Introduction

John Baptist de La Salle (1651 - 1719) was a French priest who founded¹ two great works: first, a community of teachers consecrated to the service of education for children of the artisans and the poor of his time, with a defined identity and project; second, a network of Christian schools, with a school foundation and organization born in response to the needs of those destined to receive it, the children of artisans and the poor of 17th – 18th century France, and with the clear intention of making God present in the daily fabric of life.

Both works have remained and evolved over time. The incipient community of teachers took steps towards the development of a society that took the official name of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Approved as an institute of pontifical right by a Papal Bull in 1725, it is

¹ In the correct sense, De La Salle was not a "founder" but an institutor of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This means that he did not contribute the financial resources to initiate and sustain either the schools or the community of the Brothers. From the beginning, he decided to found his work on Divine Providence and to remain dependent on the financial contributions of his employers. With this act he assured that educational service rendered was absolutely gratuitous for his those destined to receive it.

made up of lay religious who are radically committed to the educational service of children, young people and adults who are poor and, based on them, they extend their educational ministry to all, as brothers and witnesses of Jesus Christ. Today, after having expanded into more than eighty countries and having times of great numerical development, they make up an international community of about five thousand Brothers, accompanied by more than seventy thousand teachers. Together – Brothers and Lasallian teachers – they make up the great Lasallian community that have assumed as their own the educational commitment that gave it birth.

With regard to schools, today we can speak of a world-wide network of Lasallian educational institutions spread over five continents and ministering to nine-hundred thousand students who come from all social levels. There are currently formal and informal Lasallian schools; the former deal with young people from kindergarten to university age²; the latter represent a very broad spectrum of services that try to be an educational response to those with no alternatives. All the Brothers are Catholics who have made a public profession of their vocation; but not all the teachers with whom they work nor the students they deal with are Catholic, and many of them are not Christians either; thus there is the richness of an educational charism that is understood and lived by men and women from very diverse cultures and religions, able to provide ongoing dialogue between faith and culture in the school.

In this framework, we know that there is a Lasallian community of educators with their own identity; an intentional multi-cultural community with a common project, with a history and a memory that provides an identity; with some basic and essential documentation in order to understand themselves and to look to the future. It is from this community where we ask ourselves if it is possible to speak of a "Lasallian pedagogy" today.

"Lasallian" as a point of departure

John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers, over the course of forty years (1679 to 1719) developed together an eclectic and, therefore, original way of teaching children who came to their schools. In general, they belonged to a system of parish schools aimed at children of the artisans and the poor of the time.

This long process led them to systematize their experience in order to pass it on to one generation after another through a work that served as a school manual for teachers called the *Conduct of Schools*. Passed on mainly in the form of manuscripts, this reflection came from daily practices and also served in the training of new Brothers and lay teachers who learned along with them the role of the school. In 1720, after the death of De La Salle, the first printed edition of the *Conduct of Schools* appeared, whose prologue stated:

This Conduct has been drafted in the form of regulations only after many exchanges with the more experienced Brothers of the Institute who were better able to teach well; and after the experience of several years, there is nothing within it that has not been agreed upon

²The International Association of Lasallian Universities (AIUL/IALU) is made up of a network of 67 institutions around the world (cf. www.ialu.net).

and tested, whose advantages and drawbacks have not been pondered, and errors or bad results have not been foreseen, as far as possible (G.E.0.0.2).

The Conduct of Schools is not the only school work written by De La Salle or under his direct inspiration. In a special way we can also highlight the book of *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* which, along with the *Conduct*, gives the most complete image of the Christian teacher, his self-commitment, his commitment to God, society, parents, children and the Church. It is a fundamental work without which the *Conduct* loses its "spirit," its reason for being. In addition to other works of an ascetic-spiritual nature, De La Salle composed school books, such as: *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, the *Duties of a Christian*, various catechisms and songs. All of them were composed in the form of manuals for use by the teachers and their students.

De La Salle, as a Frenchman in the 17th-18th century, lived intensely the spirit of a society and a Church that was in the process of searching and of change. One-hundred years before the French Revolution, participating in its own Golden Age of Spirituality of his time, De La Salle became the inspiration for a family of Christian educators who understood their mission from the perspective of the Gospel and, therefore, consolidated their educational proposal from the horizon of faith. Without that horizon it is not possible to understand deeply their proposal of humanization.

Currently, more than three-hundred years after that foundational experience, as men and women of the 21st century, as we take up again the inherited thinking of De La Salle and his first community of Brothers, we ask ourselves the question about the conditions that make it possible to speak of a Lasallian pedagogical rationale.³ As we do this, we try to propose, rather than respond to the following question: What does a Lasallian mean when he uses the term "Lasallian pedagogy"?

Pedagogy as a problem

To continue our discussion we need to establish a basic difference between pedagogy and education. As a point of departure, we assume that when we speak of **pedagogy** we are thinking about reflection of the educational context and when we speak of **education** we are referring to the daily practice of school, understood in the broadest sense possible. We therefore identify pedagogy as the creator of the horizon of meaning that gives direction to educational practice. In this way, we intend to introduce discussion on pedagogy about what is difficult and the not always related field of epistemology. Based on that, we intend to understand it as a kind of discourse endowed with a scientific status.

But to try to discuss the epistemological status of pedagogy is like entering into a field full of obstacles. First of all, we are faced with a never-ending discussion of what epistemology is as such and its role in the overall set of human science;⁴ secondly, since pedagogy is a discourse that is

³Of course, we want to make it clear that the inheritors of this educational tradition, in the three-hundred years that separate us, also took on the responsibility of keeping alive the memory of what is "Lasallian," and tried to respond in accordance with its demands, sometimes without a clear understanding of its socio-political ecclesiological context. But this would exceed the limits of this article.

⁴In fact, it is not about resolving – by means of this article – the epistemological role of pedagogy, understanding by that term the reflection on its scientific rigor, agreed to by the international scientific community.

both traditional and innovative, which involves the school as an institution as ancient as humankind itself, we see the obligation to transcend opinion data in order to access pedagogy as scientific knowledge on the tasks of education. Both processes are, overall, complex.

Concretely the term *epistemology* appears at the beginning of the 20th century to define a specific field of discipline that takes on various nuances;⁵ for the Anglo-Saxon world, the term *epistemology* is used as a synonym for knowledge theory. Nevertheless, for the French speaking world the term *épistémologie* refers rather to the reflection on scientific knowledge specifically (cf. Soler, 2009: 16).

In this discussion, and following Soler (2009) we prefer to opt for the second perspective because, as we ask ourselves about the nature and value of principles, concepts, methods and results of scientific knowledge, we can enter into a process of reflection and critique about what we consider as scientific. Furthermore, this option helps us to place and to enrich our own discourse in relation to the overall set of what we currently know as science.

Assuming the perspective of Simard (2003), epistemological work is on the border between philosophy and science and, although it is generally practiced by philosophers, today it is also an exercise appreciated by scientists themselves. As a support for the complex processes of thought, the epistemological exercise helps "...to combat disciplinary insularism, sometimes very harmful, in order to establish a kind of nomadism of meaning and thus become the bearer of meaning..." (Simard, 2003: 15).

As a consequence of this, to work on pedagogical knowledge as scientific discourse has many thorny problems. It involves an epistemological rupture – as raised by Bachelard in his classic work *The Formation of the Scientific Spirit* (1948/2004) – with the intellectual customs already accepted that represent an intellectual obstacle for research. Would we be able to question and to problem solve what we have inherited so that something new might emerge that is scientifically consistent?

Whatever you say, in the world of science problems are not raised by themselves. It is precisely this sense of the problem with which the true spirit of science is charged. For a scientific spirit all knowledge is a response to a question. If there were no question, there could not be scientific knowledge. Nothing is spontaneous. Nothing is given. Everything is constructed (Bachelard, 1948/2004: 16).

For overall Lasallians, to ask the question of Lasallian pedagogical knowledge should be a challenge and a provocation. To re-read Lasallian texts and to build from them pedagogical discourse that are not a priori requires the maturing of philosophical, political, theological and educational options that are not insignificant. For example:

⁵ An example from the Anglo-Saxon world: "...Epistemology as the study of how we achieve knowledge or rather how we think we achieve knowledge" (Freimuth, 2009: 2). From the Francophone world: "...Epistemology studies the formation and the structure of scientific concepts and theories" (Simard, 2003: 11).

- Every question about the sense of knocking at the door of a determined philosophical rule; the meaning of life, from many perspectives, is outside of any kind of scientific discussion; for others, nevertheless, it is an essential part of the human phenomenon. The pedagogy of Lasallian inspiration should opt for the philosophical perspective that a more humanizing meaning of life may offer. This would also involve the revision of one's consistent anthropological paradigm.
- To ask the question about a pedagogy that places the poor as the preferential subject would imply a policy option where the periphery is made visible to call to the attention of a public uncomfortable with great political and financial systems. A pedagogy that thinks in terms of the poor becomes a defender of the rights of children and the young; it reviews its way of exercising authority, of understanding educational management, decision making and the building of future projects.
- To state that the transcendent is present in the human journey of the school is related to the capacity to take on an innovative image of a God open to human experience, who has been incarnated and who walks with his people; that perspective makes possible the breaking forth of an ecumenical pedagogy enriched by dialogue and encounter, that opts for what is proposed and sets aside the imposition of knowledge, options and attitudes.

In the end, to establish a link between the great themes proposed by Lasallian thought with the complexity of the current reality involves assuming, undoubtedly, that the pedagogical discourse is a deeply human exercise and, as such, takes place in the here and now. As a result:

...the question about the meaning that education has today is a central one, since in its very profound dimensions of our social memory with future perspectives are at play and the building of historically viable alternatives, in such a way that it is possible to incarnate them, based on education which means being the actor and deciding among options (Gómez Sollano, 2002: 260).

This perspective opens, nevertheless, another range of discussions about the science of pedagogical discourse. In fact, Vargas and Gamboa (2008) think of pedagogy as a project of formation, "...a philosophical problem of meaning with which human beings give content to their horizons of being, in the construction of individual and collective projects" (2008: 53). That being the case, it becomes an inter-subjective way of constructing the identity of the subjects and the diverse cultures of their peoples, in harmony with their social and political projects. Nevertheless, these actors state that pedagogy is not a science and that, therefore, it is not possible to make an epistemology of their results. This is because for them the pedagogical discourse "...is made up of the rationalization of the experiences that take place in the classroom, in the exercise of teaching knowledge. The logic of science does not have for its object the study of practices and its rationalization (Vargas and Gamboa, 2008: 54). Later on, they state: "the exercise of pedagogy is guided towards the construction of neo-narratives in which the subject...'do the narrating,' rather than the formulation of universal postulates" (Vargas and Gamboa, 2008: 55).

For his part, another author, Klaus Range (2002) proposes a look at the pedagogy that goes beyond

strictly scientific considerations:

...what matters now is not so much if the pedagogy is legitimate – in itself – as a science or not in that traditional sense, but that which is interesting is that it has the ability of validating itself in knowing, both in the theoretical and practical sense. In this way, the question about the "identity" of pedagogy no longer remains restricted to the question of its "scientificity" or what could be called its "historical-pragmatic continuity" within the order of science. What is validated here is not so much the formal, logical structure... but its pragmatic and reflecting competence within the order of knowledge and reality... (its) ability to research... a part of reality and reflect and produce some knowledge about it and, in that way, to have some repercussions on... what it thought about it... (Klaus Runge, 2002: 9-10).

Let us consider, then, that these perspectives will help us to advance in raising the question that we have proposed. To assume the critical study of pedagogy, on the way to a consideration of Lasallian heritage, commits us to assume that the pedagogical discourse can go beyond the data proper to scientific rationality⁶ in order to place..."in the terrain of history the processes which this supposes to broaden its life horizon, whether in spaces linked with the transmission of producing knowledge or with those that symbolically organize reality starting from diverse interactions..." (Gómez Sollano, 2002: 276). There is existing pragmatic competence – of pedagogy itself – that helps us to reconstruct and create new discourses.

We understand, then, that we journey towards the consideration of a scientific pedagogical rationale in dialogue with a historical perspective. This search leads, in turn, to a question about the human being and his life program. Given these considerations, we want to open the question towards a look at the Lasallian as a pedagogical discourse with its own characteristics.

A look at the founding Lasallian writings

The Lasallian writings of the origins are limited to the context of the modernity of the 17th and 18th centuries. Comenius, with his *Didactica Magna*, along with De La Salle, especially in his *Conduct of Schools*, represent two important milestones to be considered as founders-witnesses on the road to the constitution of a pedagogical discourse. They highlight the beginning of a systematic understanding of the daily life of the school based on the reading keys proper to their respective eras.

Both experiences were broadly revisited in the 19th century and questioned by traditionalists in the New School at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries⁷. Authors such as Montessori, Ferrer Guardia, John Dewey, Giner de los Ríos, Freinet, Neill, Makarenko, Piaget, Milani, Freire and Stenhouse, among others, drastically altered the pedagogical discourse in the 20th century,

⁶This crossroad between scientific reality and history is essential to understand the epistemological proposal of the present potential developed by Hugo Zemelman. In its very profound dimensions of social memory with future perspectives are articulated and the construction of historically viable alternatives (cf. Gómez Sollano, 2002: 260).

⁷Narodowski states: "...the pedagogy of the middle and the end of the 19th century is also deeply retroactive with regard to the 17th and 18th centuries: De La Salle and Comenius are once again renewed and re-elaborated but not a few pedagogues of the 19th century" (Narodowski, 1999: 187).

distancing themselves from the classical school, in search of a new course, new challenges, new perspectives. There was even the deconstructive discourse at the end of the 20th century from the hand of Michel Foucault in an original way, but perhaps rather biased, of understanding the text of the *Conduct of Schools*, in order to analyze the constitution of school discipline and the understanding of power in society.⁸

But let us go back to the beginning, to the Lasallian foundational moment. John Baptist de La Salle, priest and theologian, formed a stable community of teachers who were associated for the educational service of the poor, devoted from morning until evening in the school.⁹ It is this community that matures that educational processes, always in response to the needs of their students.¹⁰ Analyzing their journey, their experience reminds us of the characteristics that today are identified with communities of professional learning:¹¹ it was a community centered in a school that worked well;¹² sustained by the efforts of teachers who learned their trade thanks to reciprocal support and feedback; and, organized in function with their results, they encouraged the parents of the children, generally illiterate, to agree that their children should be successful in their formation.¹³

According to this experience, is it possible as Lasallians to think about a new pedagogical narrative, founded in our original memory, of organizing our schools? Let us think that our founding work gathered and made an eclectic summary of a little known and agreed to practice in its era, but thanks to the daily work of the Brothers, it became universal. Perhaps this dynamic might be the backdrop of the *Conduct of Schools*?

Understanding that discourses are practices that systematically form the objects they talk about (cf. Foucault, 2005: 81), we are invited to revisit our initial educational practice to uncover the logic

⁸ In fact, in his work *To Keep Watch and to Punish*, used texts from the *Conduct of Schools* to analyze the development of power in the modern school. Without balancing the Lasallian work overall, Foucault understands the teacher as a worker with mechanical discipline but without spirit (cf. Chapters on Discipline, Well-Trained Bodies, The Environment of Good Channeling and Panoptism).

⁹ "The purpose of this Institute is to give a Christian education to children; and for this purpose they keep schools so that, the children being morning and afternoon under the guidance of the teachers, they can teach them to live well, instructing them in the mysteries of our holy religion, inspiring Christian maxims in them, and thus giving them the education that is proper to them" (Common Rule 1.3).

¹⁰ "Consider that it is a practice only too common for the working class and the poor to allow their children to live on their own, roaming all over like vagabonds as long as they are not able to put them to some work; these parents have no concern to send their children to school... The results of this condition are deplorable, for these poor children, accustomed to lead an idle life for many years, have great difficulty adjusting when it comes time for them to go to work...God has had the goodness to remedy so great a misfortune by the establishment of the Christian Schools..." (Meditation 194,1,1-2).

¹¹ The works of Dufour et al. reviewed by Fullan (2010: 1100) in research about educational change.

¹² "The need for this Institute is very great because, the artisans and the poor ordinarily have little education, and they are occupied all day in earning wages for themselves and their children, and they cannot by themselves give them the instruction they need and a good and Christian education. To procure this benefit for the children of the artisans and the poor was the motive for which the Christian Schools were instituted" (Common Rule 1.4 - 1.5).

¹³ Studies in the area of Communities of Professional Learning have defined three essential characteristics for the promotion of a school culture: 1. Ensure that the students learn; 2. Encourage collaboration between groups of teachers; 3. Focus on results connected with the improvement of institutional practice (cf. Fullan, 2010: 1100).

that gave the reason for the discourses that we have received today as matured processes over time. The *Conduct of Schools*, the *Meditations for the Time of Retreat* and the other foundational works of Lasallian thinking, are witnesses of the first time of constituting the way of understanding the educational event, from a rationale lived in tension with a plan of salvation. Therefore, it was a discourse with a component of history, of constituting a plan for the new man. Overall, it represents a trans-discursive exercise that today raises new challenges in understanding the processes of humanization in light of the Gospel.

To make Lasallian pedagogy today an object of study could mean opening the possibility of recovering our educational memory, subject to the ups and downs of a school pragmatism that has marked us as recognized educators. It would be interesting to offer evidence concerning for what and for whom the Lasallian pedagogy came into being; what were the educational practices that gave it origin and, finally, what future projects did it promote. This three dimensions could serve as a crossroad between what we hope to find in the Lasallian pedagogical discourse: the encounter between a scientific rationale and a historical program, both elements indispensable for understanding a journey that still continues.

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