

**THE MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOLS (4)
"A rigorous learning process"**

In leaflet 03-A-19 I described the teaching given in the first schools of the Brothers and how the five subjects were introduced, one after the other, beginning with reading which formed the initial stage of the child's education.

A careful study of the "Management" shows the methods used and the characteristics of the training given. The following are among the most important:

STAGES IN LEARNING

It seems to me that we can easily distinguish the principal stages in the process by which the child mastered the elements of the programme.

★ **A "Model" is put before the child:** You find this in the different subjects taught: pronunciation and articulation in reading, headlines written by the teacher on the pupil's copybook for writing, and the copying of passages to teach spelling... You will notice, in reading the "Management" that the importance given to the concept of "model" in the school was similar to that given to the concept of good example.

★ **Imitation of the model by the child.** When necessary, the model was repeatedly placed before the pupil if he failed to grasp the meaning or to get the spelling or pronunciation right. For this the teacher called on the assistance of other pupils and only intervened himself when none of them could give the correct answer.

★ **Assimilation of the model,** through a series of exercises and constant repetition until the matter was thoroughly learned. There is repeated insistence in the "Management" on the perfection required in this learning process and on the perseverance necessary to succeed.

If the difficulty was too great for some pupils the teacher had to break down the matter into the simplest elements and repeat them as often as necessary until the pupil had mastered the whole subject bit by bit.

★ **Formation of habits and reflexes,** until the action of reading, writing or calculating became automatic. Today we would call it acquiring "know-how". But the acquisition of these habits was always accompanied by careful explanations so that the child understood what was asked of him and what he was required to do. In other words he learned intelligently.

★ **Finally the learning process ended with an evaluation,** of what had been acquired. This we shall deal with in the next leaflet.

NATURE OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

As shown in the five stages described above, we find here a form of deductive learning. It was current in 17th and 18th centuries and accorded with the ideas then prevalent of the relation between teacher and pupil and the concept of authority.

In school the pupil found himself in a situation comparable to that of an apprentice who, as in the case of all trades, bound himself to a Compagnon or Master in order to learn the trade through contact with him. This is why de La Salle insisted so frequently on the need for the teacher to master thoroughly what he was to teach to the pupils so as to be able to set them an example in everything.

This concept of teacher-pupil relations as an apprenticeship is a very ancient one which goes back to Aristotle and which can be reduced to its three principal elements: Repeated actions form habits and habits help us to practice virtue.

If we come to a period closer to the beginnings of the Brothers' schools we can find some astonishing resemblances between phrases used in the "Management of Schools" and some of those found in the "Discourse on the Method of Correct Reasoning and of Finding the Truth in Science", published by René Descartes in 1637.

The ideas of Descartes became very fashionable among the cultured classes of 18th century France and we cannot exclude the possibility that they inspired other works. One could make a comparative study of phrases and sentences in the "Management" and in the Cartesian rules (analysis, synthesis and enumeration).

STIMULI TO LEARNING

Nowadays theories of learning insist on the stimuli which encourage children to learn. We shall try to distinguish those which appear in the "Management of Schools": what encouraged the pupils to learn?

Throughout the text, and not only in the first part, we can find stimuli which I shall classify in two categories:

Explicit Stimuli:

- the child wants naturally to go to school and learn if the parents put no obstacle in the way,
- to encourage him, the school offers him a warm welcome which is in itself a stimulus to learning,
- the teacher is asked to give the pupil personal attention and affection especially if he is in any difficulty,
- his efforts and his progress are regularly noted and rewarded,
- explanation always accompanies the teaching to ensure intelligent learning,
- the teacher gives verbal encouragement and urges him to learn,
- a programme and rhythm to suit his personality gives him confidence.

Implicit Stimuli:

- the immediate correction of mistakes,
- the help of more advanced pupils,
- confidence created by success,
- solid effect of the model and of good example,
- regular evaluation of results,
- monthly change of group or section,
- wall posters urging pupils to work.

THE OBJECTIVES PROPOSED

Lasallian schools were explicitly established for a modest social class, that of "artisans and the poor". Their purpose was, on the human plane, essentially utilitarian. They set out to give their pupils the minimum of knowledge necessary to enable them to manage their personal and professional affairs. That meant finding a trade or occupation and succeeding in it thanks to what they had learned in school.

This after-school objective is explicitly mentioned in several places in the "Management of Schools" and determined the choice of certain exercises in reading, writing and spelling as well as of problems in Arithmetic.

Within the class, the organization of work aimed at efficacy: the acquisition of what would today be called basic knowledge and useful skills.

The pupils could become competent in specific occupations, for the ability to read, write and do calculations was still sufficiently rare in the France of that time to make those who had such ability a kind of privileged class.

CONCLUSIONS

What is striking in the "Management of Schools" is the rigorous organization of the learning process. There are in it some modern concepts. Knowledge of the learning process is more advanced in the 20th century than it was in the 18th and we use a different terminology, but when we get down to concrete reality I find certain things in common, for example:

- the need for thorough assimilation of the subject matter before moving from one level to a higher one,
- the recognised importance of work stimuli,
- the importance of repetition of basic facts,
- insistence on precision and clarity of models,
- positive reinforcement through immediate correction of mistakes,
- frequent and regular evaluation of knowledge acquired,
- explanations given to ensure intelligent learning.

We must not exaggerate these comparisons. But neither must we forget that the 1706 Manuscript of the "Management of Schools" was the work of Brothers whose formation was limited. That they were able to formulate, in such simple terms, such essential elements proves their wealth of experience. It shows also what can be done "together and by association".

Bro. Léon LAURAIRE, FSC
ROME