
De La Salle’s “Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher”: Still Relevant Today?

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Introduction

John Baptist de La Salle, the patron saint of teachers, lived in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (1651 to 1719). He became involved in education and founded many schools in France based upon his development of innovative and effective teaching methods. He also was a pioneer in the training of teachers. De La Salle had many ideas about education including what constitutes the characteristics and dispositions of good teachers. The purpose of this study is to compare De La Salle’ ideas about the characteristics and dispositions of good teachers to twentieth and twenty-first-century ideas about what makes a good, effective teacher.

De La Salle’s Ideas about Good Teachers

De La Salle started a Religious Order of men, Brothers of the Christian Schools, and an educational movement in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He developed Christian Schools for the poor boys of urban France who were not receiving an education. De La Salle, the son of wealthy parents and on his way to high positions in the Catholic Church, gave up his life of privilege and great opportunity to develop schools with effective and moral teachers. Brother George Van Grieken, FSC, described the kind of teachers that De La Salle wanted as having,

a combination of dedication and goodness, courage and faith, [and] very ardent zeal . . . matched with a generous disposition [with] a combination of concern and vigilance.²

Furthermore, Brother George indicated the importance of the teacher as a model and virtuous person in De La Salle’s viewpoint because, the “Lasallian educators’ way of life should be a model for their students because they ought to find in you the virtues they should practice.”³

The Beginning Teachers

There is no doubt that the first group of Brothers of the Christian Schools were virtuous, young men willing to follow De La Salle’s mission from God – to provide a proper education to young, urban boys and help them to develop a spirituality to be followers of Jesus Christ. However, biographer Jean-Baptiste Blain tells us, “The fact is that his disciples, although fervent, were not at this time very adept at their task [teaching].”⁴ In other words, they were not properly trained as teachers of reading, writing, arithmetic and Christian doctrine. Blain reinforces this lack of training by indicating, “. . . the two main elements of Christian education, namely, instruction and an effective method for imparting it were not being achieved.”⁵ Furthermore, these beginning teachers had little knowledge of methods of discipline and classroom management. These initial shortcomings in methods of teaching by the beginning teachers caused De La Salle

to become an innovator in teacher training as revealed in his teaching methodology classic, *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*. De La Salle trained the Brothers to know the subjects they would teach, the methods to teach, and the appropriate dispositions of teachers. He summarized his ideas about good teachers as “The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher.”

De La Salle’s “Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher”

De La Salle believed that it was very important for the teachers in the Christian Schools to possess virtues that would enable them to be very moral, excellent role models and effective teachers. De La Salle listed twelve virtues of good teachers in the manuscript of his pedagogical guide, *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*.⁶ Brother Gerald Rummery, FSC, indicated that the “Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher”

was addressed by Brother Agathon, FSC, fifth Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, in 1785 as the first printed circular letter.⁷

The twelve virtues are: seriousness (gravity), silence, humility, prudence, wisdom, patience, reserve (restraint), gentleness, zeal, vigilance (watchfulness), piety, and generosity.⁸ Explanations of each of the virtues, as given by Brother Agathon, FSC, in the late eighteenth century, appear below in abbreviated form.⁹

Table 1. De La Salle’s Virtues of a Good Teacher

Virtue	Description
1. Gravity	“. . . regulates the exterior of a teacher. It is conformable to modesty, politeness, and good order.” ¹⁰
2. Silence	“. . . leads the teacher to avoid speaking when he should not speak and to speak when he should not be silent” ¹¹
3. Humility	“. . . inspires us with low sentiments of ourselves . . . it directly opposes pride.” ¹²
4. Prudence	“. . . makes us understand what we need to do and what we need to avoid . . . enlightens [the teacher] about the means . . . to bring [students] up properly by educating their minds and hearts.” ¹³
5. Wisdom	“. . . gives us knowledge of the most exalted things through the most excellent principles so that we may act accordingly . . . Wisdom will also . . . make [the teacher] deeply cognizant, not only of the truths

he is obliged to teach, but of the principles of those subjects.”¹⁴

6. Patience “... makes us overcome ... all the evils of life, especially the cares inseparable from the education of youth. Patience in general applies very aptly to the good teacher ... he never grows disheartened ... from repeating the same things ...”¹⁵
7. Reserve “... makes us think, speak and act with moderation, discretion, and modesty ... consists in controlling ourselves in circumstances where we might grow angry ...”¹⁶
8. Gentleness “... inspires us with goodness, sensitivity, and tenderness ... [there are] four kinds of gentleness ... of the mind ... of the heart ... of our manner ... of our conduct ...”¹⁷
9. Zeal “... makes us procure the glory of God with great affection. A zealous teacher instructs his students ... by his good example, by solid teaching ... by wise and moderate corrections ...”¹⁸
10. Vigilance “... makes us diligent and painstaking in fulfilling all our duties ... [The teacher] must watch over himself [and] be vigilant over his students ...”¹⁹
11. Piety “... makes us fulfill worthily our duties to God ... a teacher should have the greatest care to bring up his students in religious sentiments ...”²⁰
12. Generosity “... makes us voluntarily sacrifice our personal interests to those of our neighbor ... [the teacher] makes a great sacrifice ... since he devotes himself willingly to something highly important for his neighbor ... the instruction of children ...”²¹

Brother Gerard comments on the definition of the word “virtue” as follows:

Virtue has been defined as conformity of life and conduct with the principles of morality. Virtues, therefore, are the practices and habits that are followed out in accord with these principles.²²

He also states, “The virtues – or what comes to the same thing – the qualities and characteristics of a good teacher are [De La Salle’s “Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher”].”²³

John Baptist de La Salle also wrote, as follows, about “Qualities Which New Teachers Must Acquire” in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*,

These qualities [habits] to be acquired [by the Brothers as teachers] are decisiveness; authority and firmness; reserve; vigilance; attention to oneself; professionalism; prudence; winning manners; zeal; and facility in speaking and expressing oneself clearly . . .²⁴

These qualities are similar to De La Salle’s virtues of a good teacher, and it should be noted that he also refers to the qualities as habits.

John Baptist de La Salle looked for the Brothers to have the virtues, qualities, habits, conduct, and practice that would lead them to good teaching in conformity with the principles of morality. According to Brother Domenic Everett, FSC, “De La Salle’s task in teacher education [was] to raise the moral and social character of the teachers while expanding their pedagogical knowledge and skills.”²⁵ Would De La Salle’s ideas about good teachers be in conformity with the qualities, standards, and dispositions that are used to distinguish good, effective teachers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? Are De La Salle’s virtues of good teachers still relevant today?

Contemporary Ideas of the Qualities of Good Teachers as Compared to De La Salle’s

Twentieth and twenty-first-century evaluators of effective teachers who achieve good student learning believe that such teachers must have: knowledge of their subject matter, pedagogical skills, and appropriate dispositions.²⁶

Teachers’ Knowledge of Their Subject Matter

Teachers’ knowledge of the subject matter (content) they teach is a key to effective teaching and student learning. Evidence suggests that teacher experience and subject knowledge are linked to gains in student achievement.²⁷ The Council of Chief State School Officers developed core teaching standards; and standard four is content knowledge which is defined as, “The teacher understands the central concepts, tools of inquiry, and structures of the discipline(s) he or she teaches”²⁸ The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has five core propositions (standards) for teachers; and one is, “Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students.”²⁹ The Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation offers standards (expectations) for new teachers. One such standard is,

Program completers perform as professional educators with the capacity to support success for all learners . . . [including] command of the content knowledge that they will be responsible for teaching, along with the pedagogical knowledge needed to teach that content well.³⁰

John Baptist de La Salle called for teachers (Brothers) to know the subjects they teach. As Brother Agathon, FSC, reports, “Wisdom will also show him and make him [the teacher] deeply cognizant, not only of the truths he is obliged to teach, but of the principles of those subjects.”³¹ In *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, also referred to as *The Management of Schools*, De La

Salle outlines the subjects that the Brothers must teach: reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, catechism, prayers, and music (hymns). Thus, he expected the Brothers to know these subjects well, and also, know how to teach them. Teachers' knowledge of the subjects that they teach is an expression of the virtue of wisdom.

Teachers' Pedagogical Skills

Pedagogical skills are also a very important component of effective teaching.³² The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has a core proposition (standard) that indicates that teachers should know how to teach the subjects that they teach.³³ The Council of Chief State Officers offers teaching standards that include standards in planning for instructional strategies.³⁴

John Baptist de La Salle's *The Conduct of the Christian Schools* was still used in the early twentieth century and is the original source of Lasallian pedagogy. It gave the Brothers a detailed outline of how to conduct their classes and how their schools should operate and be organized. Specific pedagogical skills included: how to instruct various subjects, discipline (corrections), placement of students in classes, the curriculum, student comportment in and out of school, and religious training. Other pedagogical skills that De La Salle stressed for the Brothers related to the virtues of gravity, silence, and reserve (restraint). Teachers must, by keeping good order in the classroom, project a sense of seriousness to their students – the virtue of gravity (seriousness). Teachers must know how to communicate well, when to speak and when not to speak – the virtue of silence. Teachers must also comport themselves in the classroom by acting with moderation and maintaining self-control – the virtue of reserve. De La Salle's pedagogy and teacher training were very innovative in his time and relate well to twenty-first century pedagogy.

Teachers' Dispositions

John Baptist de La Salle's virtues of good teachers can be most aptly compared to today's positive, observed dispositions of good teachers. However, among today's educators there is little agreement on the definition of dispositions of good teachers. Frederick Mish provides a definition of dispositions as, “. . . prevailing tendency, mood, or inclination . . . temperamental makeup.”³⁵ The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education defined teacher dispositions as, “The values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students, families, colleagues, and communities”³⁶ Roger Berman, in a review of John Dewey's work, states,

Dewey defines dispositions as a disregard for personal fulfillment in a search for what is moral . . . in essence, putting aside what might best serve the self for what is best for the common good.³⁷

Anthony Combs refers to teacher dispositions as the perceptions and attitudes that shape their behavior.³⁸ Carole Helm referred to the following dispositions for beginning teachers to be effective in the classroom: caring, kindness, integrity, initiative, skill development, fairness, decency, service, pro-social behavior, humility, trust, empathy, healing, and a sense of community.³⁹

Other educators have connected dispositions to morality, as did De La Salle. Hugh Sockett indicates that we should view the desirable dispositions of teachers as virtues.⁴⁰ Richard Osguthorpe speaks of virtue in an Aristotelian perspective, “. . . wherein the young acquire virtue by being around virtuous people.”⁴¹ De La Salle wanted the Brothers to be virtuous persons and teachers as role models for their students. Terry Burant, Sharon Chubbuck, and Joan Whipp reviewed qualities needed in teachers and indicated that these qualities often related to moral sensibility.⁴² They suggest the works of Paulo Freire and Martin Haberman as examples of the qualities of moral sensibilities in teachers. Paulo Freire listed qualities of good teachers that suggest moral sensibility as: humility, lovingness, courage, patience, and a joy of living.⁴³ Martin Haberman also suggested similar qualities of moral sensibilities in teachers as: persistence, caring, personal responsibility, love of learning, courage, confidence, reflectivity of actions, and humility.⁴⁴ Roger Bergman pointed out John Dewey’s idea that teachers should put aside their self-interests for that of their students.⁴⁵ This is an expression and example of the virtue of generosity.

John Baptist de La Salle’s virtues of good teachers were equated to qualities and characteristics of good teachers by Brother Agathon.⁴⁶ These qualities and characteristics include dispositions of good teachers in conformity with contemporary ideas. The contemporary literature on the dispositions of good teachers directly mention these virtues as listed by De La Salle: humility, patience, prudence (what we need to do), gentleness (kindness), vigilance (care of students), piety (fulfilling your duties to God and student), zeal (enthusiasm), generosity, and wisdom (knowing subject matter and how to teach it). The virtues of gravity (seriousness), silence (proper communication), and reserve (restraint) are components of pedagogical skills called for by De La Salle and contemporary educators.

In concluding this section on a comparison of De La Salle’s virtues of good teachers and contemporary ideas of good teachers, it is clear that De La Salle’s *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, including “The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher,” cover all of twenty-first century characteristics of good teachers: subject matter knowledge, pedagogical skills, and teacher dispositions.

Conclusion

According to Brother Yves Poutet, FSC, De La Salle referred to, “. . . pedagogical virtue . . . [that] cannot really exist unless practice is joined to theory.”⁴⁷ Pedagogical practice and theory are updated as new insights into effective teaching are explored. Similarly, ideas about what makes a good teacher may be updated over time. The ideas in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, including “The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher,” reveal, according to Brother Yves, “. . . experiences that are localized in time and space.”⁴⁸ Today, De La Salle’s educational ideas have been adapted to new circumstances and times, e.g., computers, the Internet, educational research, accreditation, and new teacher training methods. However, De La Salle’s original “Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher” still provide an excellent list of virtues, dispositions, and habits for today’s teachers to develop and embrace. This is truly remarkable since De La Salle’s educational ideas were developed over 300 years ago!

In 1990, the Lasallian Institute received an award, the Noma Prize, for continuing to develop its pedagogy in response to basic needs in education, especially in service to the poor.⁴⁹ In 2019, Pope Francis, at a Papal audience for Lasallians, made this statement,

May you always carry out your mission among the younger generations with renewed vigor, with that reforming boldness that characterized Saint John Baptist de La Salle.⁵⁰

Thus, De La Salle's work and legacy, including "The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher," are still alive and highly regarded throughout the world and still relevant and inspirational in the twenty-first century!

Endnotes

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