
Teaching in Tumultuous Times: Cultivating Critical Lasallian Virtues in Future Teachers

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As Lasallian educators, it is our responsibility to teach minds, touch hearts and transform the lives of the students entrusted to our care.⁴ This aspirational statement serves to inspire, but it also raises many questions about what "habits of the heart" constitute caring, and how teacher preparation programs might prepare future teachers to care for their students and support their diverse needs during frightening, unpredictable, unprecedented times such as those we are living through at present. During these anxiety-filled days, in the midst of a pandemic and various social crises, the call to prepare teacher candidates to care for increasingly diverse students, students from every conceivable type of poverty, students with a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and students who have a range of special learning needs, is the realization of the Lasallian mission.

Our Lasallian-ism is truly being affirmed by the many difficult conditions children and teachers are now facing in our schools. For example, a critical transition occurred in the spring of 2020, when nearly all schools in the United States of America closed because of the COVID-19 emergency. Since the fall of 2020, students have attended class in-person, remotely, or in a hybrid format; and these changes have created unpredictable and traumatic circumstances for many students, families, and teachers. Teachers are tasked with caring for others; but in order to effectively address the adverse challenges and diverse needs of students, it is critical that teacher candidates starting their vocation develop the personal characteristics as well as the pedagogical tools to guide their interactions with students and families, as well as their instructional decisions. John Baptist de La Salle's *Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher* provides a reflective framework for future teachers who are committed and ready to become competent and caring teacher educators capable of addressing the needs of under-served, vulnerable populations.

The Twelve Virtues

In 1706, John Baptist de La Salle, Patron Saint of Teachers and Founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, listed twelve virtues of a good teacher in *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*.⁵ In 1785, Brother Agathon, the fifth Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, reissued the list in a much longer letter, entitled *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*.⁶ It is now more crucial than ever to realize the Lasallian mission with which the virtues align. Increased poverty, immigration, social unrest and health crises have presented teachers with increasingly diverse students with a range of learning and social-emotional needs. In order to care effectively for themselves and their students, educators in Lasallian educational institutions now aspire to cultivate the *Twelve Virtues*, as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

*The Twelve Lasallian Virtues of a Good Teacher*⁷



Educators can embody these virtues with reflection on their practices and commitment to the Founder. In the Lasallian context, the term “virtue” has been defined as “conformity of life and conduct with the principles of morality. Virtues, therefore, are the priorities and habits that are followed out in accord with these principles.”⁸ Saint John Baptist de La Salle strongly recommended that all teachers cultivate and reflect on these virtues and adopt positive habits to best serve the needs of the students in their care. De La Salle’s heritage is strongly rooted in the

Catholic tradition and calls us to rejoice about the vocation of teaching. This legacy is present today at Lasallian schools and colleges, such as the institution where this project occurred.

Context

The institution of higher education where the study of the *Twelve Virtues* occurred is located in New York City. The teacher preparation program within the institution assigns student teachers to public elementary schools in urban classrooms in the Bronx, one of the most diverse boroughs in New York City (and the United States of America) where over 105,000 students in New York City's public schools – nearly 1 in 10 – were homeless during the 2016-2017 school year,⁹ and over 21,000 elementary school-aged children in the Bronx do not have English as their primary, first language, which is more than 50% of all students.¹⁰ In De La Salle's time, there were similarly vulnerable populations to serve. Today, in the context of current events that have impacted minority populations both emotionally and economically, the suffering of some students and their families impels the need for future teachers to reflect on their readiness to serve these diverse populations, and requires Lasallian universities to cultivate our Lasallian virtues both in and out of the classroom.

Virtues in Action

“Curriculum Adaptations” is a capstone course that student teachers, of the institution where this project occurred, enroll in during their senior year. They take the course at the same time they begin their student teaching. As part of this course, a workshop titled “Being a Lasallian Educator: The Twelve Lasallian Virtues” was presented by a Lasallian Administrator of the Year Award recipient. This workshop was presented to fifty teacher candidates over the course of three semesters, and its focus was the interplay between the student teachers' abilities to apply these virtues toward their students' development and wellbeing. The presentation included a review of the legacy of Saint John Baptist de La Salle and his innovation of modern pedagogy, which places a strong emphasis on teacher training. This workshop re-introduced *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher* which had been presented to the future teachers earlier in their program of studies, as a critical and reflective tool to be utilized during the student teaching experience – their first teaching experience. These teacher candidates were given scenarios and reflective exercises pertaining to the demands of new teachers. They were asked to consider how those demands could affect the balance of their personal and professional lives, as well as their identities as teachers.

At the end of the semester, at the culmination of their student teaching experiences, the student teachers were again provided with a list of the virtues and were asked to reflect on and choose one virtue they felt they possessed – that they considered a strength – and one virtue they felt was the most challenging for them – a virtue they needed to develop. The future teachers were then asked to participate in a reflective writing exercise to elaborate on why they selected each virtue. *Table 1* depicts the student teachers' selection of the virtues over three semesters.

Table 1

Teacher Candidates Responses on Selected Virtues
Fall 2017 / Spring 2018 / Spring 2019
(n=50)

Lasallian Virtue			% of students selected	
	Selected as Challenging Virtue	Selected as Confident Virtue	Virtue as Challenging	Virtue with Confidence
Zeal	3	10	6%	20%
Wisdom	1	1	2%	2%
Vigilance	1	5	2%	10%
Silence	10	1	20%	2%
Reserve	17	5	34%	10%
Prudence	0	6	0%	12%
Piety	4	2	8%	4%
Patience	8	2	16%	4%
Humility	2	5	4%	10%
Gravity	2	3	4%	6%
Gentleness	1	4	2%	8%
Generosity	1	6	2%	12%
<i>Totals</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>

Findings

As illustrated in *Table 1*, reflective responses were codified into common categories. The student teachers reported that zeal, prudence and generosity were strengths they brought to their teaching. However, they also reported that they were most challenged by reserve and silence.

Twenty percent of students reported that as a result of their student teaching experience, they had more zeal than ever for their students and their content area. In a written statement in which she elaborated on her selection, Christina (2018) wrote

My cooperating teacher’s zeal was infectious. I saw her enthusiasm and passion for teaching and her students in every facet of instruction, and it made me more enthusiastic about serving my students and about teaching! I have more zeal now than before I started my placement.

Samantha (2018) shared, “I love my job, I love my students, and after this teaching experience, I’m a more zealous teacher.” What was most common in the written reflections of students who self-identified with zeal as a strong virtue were statements about a sense of passion and commitment to the teaching profession and the assertion that the virtue was at the core of their identities. Additionally, students who selected zeal with confidence reported that they also connected this virtue to service outside of the classroom (e.g., Sunday school teaching, tutoring, coaching a team, community service, mission service trips, working with special needs students, and working at a summer camp). These reflections illustrate students’ zeal for service that extended beyond the college campus as students enthusiastically and voluntarily shared their gifts in service to others. This serves as a reminder that these kinds of opportunities are also formative for future teachers.

Prudence and generosity each accounted for 12% of students' responses regarding their strongest virtues. Students who selected these virtues wrote about how important it was to consider carefully their words and actions, as a teacher can powerfully impact the confidence and self-perception of individual students and influence the classroom environment. The student teachers who identified with these virtues wrote that they felt strongly that they served as positive role models. This group of student teachers wrote about how they formed relationships with their students and addressed their unique needs by providing help before and after school and brought in snacks for those students who did not bring food from home. Matt (2019) wrote,

I felt really connected to my students' needs. Many of my students lived in homeless shelters, and I went out to buy school supplies or snacks whenever they were in need. When students were having a bad day and acting out, I realized that they may not have slept in a bed or they didn't have breakfast. These conditions affected their learning and behavior.

As depicted in *Table 1*, students felt challenged by reserve and silence. Both of these virtues together represented 54% of the student teachers' responses. Reserve was reported by 34% of the respondents, and 20% of the group reported silence as challenging. Many of the students who selected these virtues explained that they had difficulty controlling their emotions at times. Most acknowledged they had been challenged by these virtues their whole lives, and even considered their challenges as bad habits that they needed to improve upon. Maria (2018) reported, "I must work on showing restraint in the face of annoyance. I want to avoid showing frustration as I guide students in their work." One student who reported being challenged by silence wrote,

I have a habit of thinking with my mouth instead of my head, which sometimes gets me into disagreements. After acknowledging that there was room to cultivate this virtue, I was encouraged to enact practices for growth and improvement.

Many students explicitly stated a desire to improve on the virtue of silence, and contemplated specific corrective plans linked to their studies of social-emotional learning. Suggestions included engaging in meditation and stepping away from disruptive and challenging situations, rather than diving into them. The student teachers were encouraged to share these social-emotional learning practices with their students as well. Other students' suggestions were more specific to their strong backgrounds in faith, reflecting on the idea that they see all children as children of God and that they try to see God in others. Additional responses showed a reliance on prayer and God's guidance to work through challenging moments. Teacher candidates confided that they need to be aware of and control their own limitations in order to model positive behaviors for their students.

Even though patience was not cited as one of the most challenging virtues, a common thread throughout the written responses was the student teachers' need to remain patient. For example, Tara (2017) confided that her cooperating teacher told her not to focus on the children who don't "get it," but to put her efforts into helping students who struggled less, so that she would see her efforts come to fruition more quickly. The student teacher, however, summoned her patience and spent time with the children who needed help while her cooperating teacher taught the rest of the class. Additionally, written responses revealed that the student teachers were focused on the whole child. Chelsea (2017) reported, "I discovered the importance of factoring in the uniqueness of each

student as an individual and learning about their lives when teaching them any subject.” This understanding might be tied to the virtue of wisdom, the ability to discern how a child’s school life, home life, and prior experiences impact their academic learning. Some of the future teachers addressed how a cooperating teacher affected their development of virtues in positive ways. Carla (2018) wrote, “My cooperating teacher raised her voice so often that I decided to speak calmly. They responded better to this approach.” This insight might be tied to the virtue of reserve.

Students’ Final Reflections

Future teachers, like many educators serving a variety of students today, acknowledged that cultivating these Lasallian virtues is a “work in progress.” As they begin their journey as Lasallian educators, many have expressed concern about how they might enact these virtues during the challenging times in which we live. It is certainly easier to consistently live out these ideals in calm, harmonious times. Truly internalizing these virtues can be a lifelong pursuit, even for experienced teachers, as disappointments and disruptions in our teaching lives can challenge our abilities to enact the virtues. Erin (2018) wrote,

I listed patience as one of the virtues I felt that I was challenged by, but I realize that these virtues embody the behaviors that we hope to achieve and internalize. On a daily basis, there were times and situations when my patience was tested by my students. As I reflected on my behavior, I realized I could have been more patient, and in the future, I will monitor my progress toward this goal.

The student teachers communicated that they used *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher* framework as a continuous reminder and reference during their student teaching experiences. As part of their course materials, the student teachers were provided with journals and bookmarks to encourage them to reflect consciously on the *Twelve Virtues* and monitor their emotions and behavior toward their students. They were encouraged to use these resources to examine their instructional choices and the manner in which they interacted with the students they served.

Students shared that they used the *Twelve Virtues* as a “checklist” to reflect on their daily behaviors. The workshop made them more conscious of their own emotions and behaviors and the way they treated not only their students, but guided how they built relationships with teachers and families.

Some teacher candidates used this list of virtues to focus on the development of one virtue a week, and they shared strategies they used to improve their practice. For example, Meghan (2017) commented,

I realized that the way I demonstrate these virtues directly affect the way my students reacted to me. If I model these virtues, my students will begin to learn by example and be more caring toward me and each other. If I continue to practice these virtues, they will become who I am. I will be generous, not act generously.

Discussion

The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher addresses not only the academic, but also the social and emotional development of teachers and students. Lasallian educators understand that academic learning cannot occur when a student's social-emotional needs go unmet, and that we always honor the backgrounds and experiences of our students. The *Twelve Virtues* can be extended and applied to all educators, administrators, and support staff to cultivate self-renewal and continuous professional and personal growth. When teaching and learning in a virtual environment, being more patient and striving to develop relationships is challenging, but even more crucial. It requires that we provide multiple pathways to successfully meet the goals we establish for our students and always cultivate the *Twelve Virtues* as a foundation for our relationships and our teaching. This article shows the potential influence of focused reflection and its usefulness in incorporating the Lasallian virtues for all personnel in various programs for all levels of education. A strong focus on these virtues will guide future teachers as they embark on their careers during this difficult time, a time when their efforts to provide loving care for their students will surely be impactful and necessary. If humanity is to survive the multiple crises we are currently presented with and thrive in the future, we must care for one another. If a teacher is to have a long, satisfying, and impactful career, cultivating the twelve virtues will be critical.

The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher may be helpful if they are introduced as future teachers begin their vocational journeys and at multiple points in their preparation. These virtues can be revisited and reflected on during all phases of learning to teach, especially when students conduct their observational field hours and observe teachers who enact zeal, by going "above and beyond" for their students, enact prudence by helping their students feel emotionally safe and cared for, enact generosity by spending time not only on academic learning, but on helping students develop the social and emotional skills required to navigate our tumultuous times.

The framework of *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*, as well as the reflective practice described in this article, may also be applied as a dispositional assessment to be included in a portfolio for formal admittance into a teacher education program as well as a culminating written graduation requirement used as a measure to provide evidence of the development of professionalism and commitment to teaching as a vocation. As this article suggests, "the challenges are great, but so too are our dreams to construct a future inspired by our Lasallian values."¹¹

Endnotes

1. Lisa Anne Vacca-Rizopoulos, who earned her doctorate at Fordham University, is a professor in the education department at Manhattan College in Riverdale, New York. Lisa was named Lasallian Educator of the Year in 2012-2013. She teaches undergraduate literacy courses for regular and inclusive classes. Her research interests include effective literacy strategies for English as a new language learners and students with various learning challenges. Lisa has published many articles on the effective infusion of technology to support literacy development for diverse learners.

2. Trace Lahey, who earned her doctorate at Columbia University, is a teacher educator living in New York State. Trace has served as a teacher and administrator in a range of educational settings. She has taught at both the elementary and secondary levels. Prior to joining the faculty at Manhattan College, Trace also served as a clinical professor, working intensely with student teachers. Her research interests include preparing future teachers, literacy in the content areas, and integrating creative methods in the classroom.

3. Lisa Juncaj is the director of business systems at Manhattan College in Riverdale, New York. She earned her BA in elementary education at Manhattan College in 1999 and completed her MS in organizational leadership at Manhattan College in 2021. She was named Lasallian Administrator of the Year in 2008-2009. She is a member of the Association for Lasallian Mission Committee of the District of Eastern North America (DENA), a community of Brothers of the Christian Schools and Lasallian Partners. Lisa is a frequent presenter for the Professional Development Group, and her research interests include organizational leadership.

4. Cf. John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, translated by Richard Arnandez FSC and edited by Augustine Loes FSC and Francis Huether FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1994), *passim*.

5. John Baptist de La Salle, *The Conduct of the Christian Schools*, translated by F. de La Fontainerie and Richard Arnandez FSC and edited with notes by William Mann FSC (Landover, MD: Lasallian Publications, 1996), page 187.

6. Cf. Agathon FSC, *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*, translated with preface by Gerard Rummery FSC (Washington, DC: Christian Brothers Conference, 2000, 2nd edition 2008).

7. This graphic of *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher* was created at De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines.

8. Agathon FSC, page ix.

9. *The Atlas of Student Homelessness in New York City*, 2016-2017. <https://www.icphusa.org/reports/on-the-map-the-atlas-of-student-homelessness-in-new-york-city-2018-section-1/>

10. *Division of English Language Learners and Student Support English Language Learner Demographics Report for the 2016-2017 School Year*. https://infohub.nyced.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2016-17-demographic-report-v10_remediated.pdf

11. Cf. Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría FSC, “University Education within the Lasallian Mission” in *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 9, no. 3 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, 2018), page 115.