

**ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
CURRICULUM IN
DE LA SALLE'S DAY**

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General idea of the programme.

The French name for elementary schools in De la Salle's Day was "petites ecoles". Their basic curriculum concentrated on reading, writing and bookkeeping (1), with religion and politeness completing the programme (2).

Those subjects formed the kernel, but others were added, like Scripture as part of catechism (3), and arithmetic was included in bookkeeping. Some authors combine the latter two, though others affirm that they were different subjects. There is quite frequent mention also of French grammar (4). But when this subject is mentioned, the university does not seem to have looked favourably on elementary schools teaching it, since they were jealous of the latter's success, which resulted in some university halls being deserted. In fact a decree of 1675 backed the university and forbade school teachers giving instruction in grammar except as a side issue to reading and writing (5).

A necessary aspect of reading, writing and grammar was the teaching of spelling, nearly all contemporary documents mentioning it (6). To that was added punctuation (7).

In some schools singing constituted the artistic element of the programme (8). Latin also is sometimes mentioned, but at an elementary level. It was studied more thoroughly however in Paris as preparation for secondary school, known as a college in those days (9). Even Greek was taught in some Paris elementary schools with a view to college entry (10).

Reading, as top priority.

Reading took first place among the basic subjects. The teacher, in order to qualify, had at least in some towns, to be able to read not only printed matter but also documents

written by hand (11). In fact documents counted as genuine for this kind of reading were anything actually handwritten. But there were other documents, similar to manuscripts, used by students, viz books called Books of Civility printed in Gothic characters.

Albert Valentine mentions that this kind of document was a transition between handwritten and printed material (12). For the author of the "Parish School" however, these texts were exactly the same as Manuscripts, since he arranged that they should be used at the same time as manuscripts (13) in schools. The "Conduct of Schools" composed by de La Salle, seems to side with the first idea that they were a transition, since the students were, according to that book, expected to read the Book of Politeness first and then to go on to the reading of manuscripts found in registers etc. (14). Whatever the case, reading gothic characters (in the books of Politeness) was required everywhere in elementary schools, as well as was the reading of manuscripts properly so called.

Catechism, the queen of subjects.

Catechism was the key subject in schools. Even such an important subject as reading was in view of a student's learning about his religion, for if he could read, he could complete his religious studies by himself (15).

Religious Instruction and formation differ according to place. The Council of Cambrai (1565) and Alexander Farnese (1580) ordered that the following be items learnt: the Apostles' Creed, the Our Father, the Angelus, the Ten Commandments, Church Laws and how to go to confession (16). But the Synod of Ypres (1630) ordered the teacher to make the children learn a lesson from the Elementary Catechism each week, and told the teacher to go with the children to parish catechism on certain set days (17).

The author of the "Parish school" spends the whole second part of his book on catechism, and heads that part of the book with the title: "On piety". It has six parts:

1. Catechism during the last quarter hour.
2. Ordinary catechism for Paris or the dioceses.
3. Catechism on mysteries.
4. Catechism on Confirmation.
5. Penance.
6. Holy Communion.

The catechism for the last quarter hour took place every day. It dealt with confirmation on the ten days before it was received, on confession for fifteen days before students ordinarily went to confession. Other than the above, the time was spent on explaining prayers, duties of a Christian, Mass and the Holy Rosary (18).

The ordinary catechism of Paris or diocese was given twice a week. It is quite solemn and has three parts: 1. revision of the chief prayers. 2. part of the list of the main mysteries: Holy Trinity, Incarnation etc. 3. recitation of the catechism text (19).

A third kind of catechism was "Catechism on the chief mysteries of the year". It covers the important religious feasts of the liturgical year and is intended to prepare the students

to spend them like Christians. The emotions were brought to bear in this matter, and to achieve emotional involvement, graphic explanations were needed (20).

Importance of teaching technical subjects.

Technical teaching for boys or girls is dealt with in documents coming from all parts of France especially from the industrial north.

The regulations of Demia pay special attention to students' manual work in keeping with their industrial surroundings (21). "The Genuine Constitutions" of the Daughters of the Congregation of Our Lady by Saint Peter Fourier, also speaks of craft work of a useful and becoming kind for girls, whether poor or rich (22). Those who financed the schools insisted in several parishes on technical subjects being taught, and preferred the terms "manual work" for girls and "Professional work" for boys (23).

"Manual Work" and "Professional Work" were prominent in northern France. In Lille, the Sister of Our Lady of the Presentation taught "reading, writing and manual work". In Stappaert (1656) the students had to learn "some profession or skill to earn a living". In Cambrai (1633) young girls learnt how to sew, weave, make lace and other such things, and when they reached the right age, they were taught household skills like washing, bread making, cooking etc. Douai and Dunkirk had weaving shops where girls learnt to weave. In Douai and Lille, there existed drawing schools. From 1698 onwards, in the municipalities of Ypres and Tournais, teachers had to give instruction in horticulture and orchard care. This kind of work, according to article 2 of the regulations was excellent physical exercise, gave students a taste for country life, kept the students simple in their private and public contacts, and encouraged a love of work which for the students assured an honourable well-being (24).

The encouragement of technical subjects through "Colbertism".

There can be little doubt that the pressures put on schools in the 17th Century to make boys and girls learn practical skills were directives from the highest level and had wide implications, because they were based on the general encouragement that Colbert had given to industry and commerce. Ever since his appointment as councillor of state in 1649 until his death on September 6, 1683, all Colbert's efforts were aimed at the prosperity of France. By pressing for the formation of local skilled workers, he recognised that France would become economically independent of its rivals.

Colbert had no liking for agriculture. First he imagined that agriculture would never be able to produce enough for export. He also thought that floods, droughts and storms were all bent on ruining his plans for prosperity in that direction. Another pointer against agriculture was that Colbert assumed it depended on those aristocrats who lived out of town and, as they were, in his opinion, a degenerate lot, they

would be unable to produce anything. That is why he concentrated on industry as his chief commercial asset.

He therefore pressed for improvement in every aspect of industry, beginning at the bottom with the teaching of industrial skills, which the state itself undertook to foster. The workshops of the Louvre and the Tuilleries, the Gobelines and the royal factories and hostels, and naval construction and hydrography schools competed in training apprentices (25).

Under Colbert's direction the Academy of Sciences published "Description of Arts and Crafts" in 1675 and "Treatise concerning machines", whose first volume came out in 1677. Books on Technology began to appear like "The perfect Businessman" of Jacques Savary in 1669, "Effective accounting" of Barrême in 1670. "Le Journal des Savants" explains the new industrial techniques used from 1665 (26).

All this interest in industry at top level had its counterpart in the elementary technical instruction which spread to schools, so that we can say that Colbertism itself in that way reached the schools (27).

(1) cf COMPAYRES. Carlos Demia y los orígenes de la enseñanza primaria. Madrid. 1928. pp 93-94.

(2) ALLAIN. E. L'instruction Primaire en France avant la Révolution, d'après les travaux récents et les documents inédits. Paris. 1881. p 166.

(3) MOREL. E. Les écoles dans l'ancien diocèse de Beauvais, Noyon et Senlis. Compiègne. 1887. p 106.

(4) FONTAINE DE ROSBECQ. Histoire de l'enseignement primaire avant 1789 dans les communes qui ont formé le département du Nord. Lille-Paris. 1878. pp 73-75.

(5) RIANCY. H. Histoire critique et législative de l'instruction publique et de la liberté d'enseignement en France. Paris. 1844. p 351.

(6) cf FONTAINE DE ROSBECQ. oc p 75.

(7) Essai d'une école chrétienne. part IV. ch XV.

(8) cf CHARMASSE. A. de. État de l'instruction dans l'ancien diocèse d'Autun pendant les dix-septième et dix-huitième siècles. Paris-Autun. 1878. p 6.

(9) cf L'Escole paroissiale. p 234.

(10) Ibid.

(11) ALLAIN. E. oc pp 168-169.

(12) ALBERT VALENTIN. Edition critique des Règles de la Bien-séance et de la Civilité Chrétienne. Paris 1956. p 545.

(13) L'Escole Paroissiale. p 234.

(14) Conduct of Schools pp 45-46.

(15) This was an argument used in the time of Father Barre against the need of schools (H. DE GRAZES. Life of Father Barre. Bar-leDuc. without date).

(16) FONTAINE DE ROSBECQ. oc p 145.

(17) Id p 30.

(18) L'Escole Paroissiale. pp 111-112.

(19) id pp 113-114.

(20) Id p 124.

(21) Regulations. chapter II. art.3. p 14.

(22) Genuine Constitutions II. XV.48 and III. XXIII.88.

(23) URSEAU. CH. L'Instruction Primaire avant 1789 dans les paroisses du diocèse actuel d'Anger. Paris. 1890. pp 135-138 and 119-120.

(24) FONTAINE DE ROSBECQ. oc pp 76-77.

(25) cf GAXOTTE. P. La France de Louis XIV. Hachette. 1946. p 52.

(26) cf MOUSNIER. R. Les XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles. P.U.F. Paris. 1954. pp 249-256.

(27) Colbertism is not limited to the period when Colbert himself was in charge of French economic and industrial policy. As Roland Mousnier says: "Colbertism influenced the whole century, being strongest when under Henry IV from 1596 onwards it was backed by the absolutism that Richelieu assured and at least until 'le grand choix' of war in 1631. and under Louis XIV from 1661 onwards" (id p 249).