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 seemed 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 Poi­teness) 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
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 had left 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 Tuileries, the Gobelins and the royal factories and hostels, and naval construction and hydrography schools competed in training apprentices (25).


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).