

## **Principal's Sabbatical Report**

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**Principal**

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**New Plymouth**

### **Sabbatical period**

4 June until 28 August 2011

### **Intended professional outcomes**

The professional purpose in taking this sabbatical was to deepen personal understanding of boys' education and the philosophy behind Lasallian education (pertaining to the schools founded on the charism of St John Baptist de La Salle). My intuition was to explore the importance of *relationships*. This proved to be a good hunch.

### **Report intention**

This report is written in accord with the Ministry's conditions of application for sabbaticals so that principals' learnings may be shared for the benefit of the common good. It has not been composed as a lengthy research paper. Its intention instead, as a collection of impressions, is to provide food for thought.

### **Personal background**

After 30 years teaching in three Catholic secondary school positions, I took up my second principalship at Francis Douglas Memorial College in New Plymouth at the start of 2009 - the 50<sup>th</sup> Jubilee year of the College. Having worked within the religious frameworks of the Rosminians, Mercy Sisters, Christian Brothers, Dominicans and Josephite Sisters, I was familiar with their similarities but well aware of the need to understand and emphasise the subtle differences in the charisms that imbued their schools. In taking up my present position as the first non-brother principal in a year when the Brothers ceased being residential in the College, and in making the transition from co-educational to boys-only, for my first time, presented opportunity for learning and the need for appropriate adjustment.

My forthright colleagues and life on the factory floor have provided much of the input I have been exposed to. I am grateful for having passed through that and appreciative of the patience and restraint shown by some who held apprehensions and mourned the loss of the Brothers. Other input has come from gatherings arranged by the De La Salle Brothers and attendance at the IBSC (International Boys' Schools Coalition) Conference in Hastings in 2009.

With the additional opportunity proffered by the Brothers to attend the fortnight long Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies in California and the serendipitous scheduling of the year's IBSC Global Conference in London two days later, I applied for a principal's sabbatical in order to attend both in conjunction with some visits to schools, some sightseeing and personal reflection time.

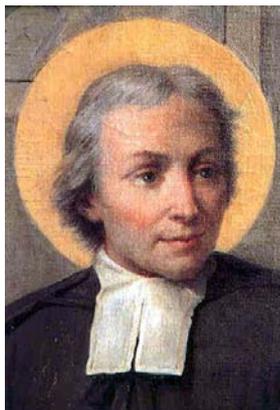
### **Sabbatical activities pertinent to my role as an educator**

- 26 June – 8 July 2011 - Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies – St Mary's College – Moraga - California
- 10 – 13 July - IBSC 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Global Conference – City of London School, London
- Visits to
  - 13 June - Sacred Heart Cathedral Preparatory School – San Francisco
  - 13 June - De Marillac Catholic Primary School – San Francisco
  - 10 – 13 July - City of London School - London
  - 13 July - Eton College - London
  - 21 July - Edmund Rice Centre - Christian Brothers' headquarters - Waterford, Ireland
  - 28 July – 2 August - La Salle College – Kowloon - Hong Kong
- Discussion with course participants and personnel in schools

## Buttimer Institute of Lasallian Studies – California

This California gathering is held annually for a fortnight. Forty participants from worldwide Lasallian institutions attend for each of three years concentrating consecutively on the life, teaching then spirituality of St John Baptist de La Salle.

The days at Buttimer were highly structured with lectures, reading times, practica and discussions. Prescribed reading materials also served to deepen the understandings touched on during lectures. From my point of view the organisation was second to none and the relevance of the material was evident in the willing participation of all attendees throughout. All material was presented in a very open way where critique and honesty were welcomed. The emerging person of De La Salle, his genius, his humanity and his persistence all maintained our ongoing attention.



John Baptist de La Salle was a French priest born in the seventeenth century. He came from a well to do family and was destined for prestigious positions in the Catholic Church when he became involved with a group of men who were teaching poor children in parish charity schools. Within five years he became completely devoted to the education of these children and to the training of these men, forming them into a competent and committed group of educators whose whole lives were dedicated to the ministry of teaching. Once involved, De La Salle gave away his wealth and became fully associated with the Brothers and with education. In the process he wrote a school handbook (that became a standard for Catholic education throughout Europe), textbooks for students in the areas of reading, politeness, religious education and many other works. By the end of his life in 1719 there were 23 houses of Brothers teaching throughout

France and a large body of educational writings.

In a biography on De La Salle, we read, *“The originality of John Baptist de La Salle is not so much that he was a pioneer, for example, in gratuitous schools for the poor, the simultaneous method, the use of French as a vehicle of instruction, centres for training teachers, or any of the other educational innovations with which he is credited. Rather, his contribution was to create, resolutely and against great odds, a stable community of religiously motivated (teachers) to construct a network of schools throughout France that would make practical and permanent the best elements from the pioneers who had gone before him.”* Luke Salm, fsc. *The Work is Yours*, p54.

His path however on a political, personnel and personal basis was not a smooth one. Later in his life, De La Salle said if he had known the tribulations his charitable help with those schoolmasters would have led to, he would have dropped the whole thing immediately.

For me, in addition to his educational innovations, in an age when such things were counter cultural, the greatest insights De La Salle showed were to:

- place an emphasis on “association for the service of the poor through education”.
- “Look beneath the rags and find the child Jesus” – De La Salle.
- Instruct that gratuitous schools were to mean more than being cost free to families. In addition, services were to be freely given in a manner that enabled recipient families to retain their dignity.
- place special emphasis on implementing correction rather than punishment.
- explore the concept of “Together and by Association” meaning that hierarchical structures were minimised so the voice and opinion of each member was better heard.
- stress the need for quality relationships between the teacher and the students. De la Salle urged the Brothers to be with the students from morning to night, to be like an elder brother to them. On a deeper level, he encouraged the Brothers to have regard for each pupil as a person, to see in the student before them, the person of Jesus Christ.

De La Salle was canonized a saint in 1900 and in 1950 was declared “Special Patron of All Teachers of Youth”.

Today the De La Salle brothers are the largest group of lay religious men in the Catholic Church dedicated exclusively to education. Along with lay staff, there are about 77,000 educators in more than 1000 Lasallian institutions in 84 countries.

Lasallian association has now been extended beyond the Brothers to other educators and interested persons and stresses these relational elements for those who wish to be involved.

- Association exists for mission
- Association implies being a member of a community for the mission
- Association results from experience and is a dynamic journey, not an acquired status
- Association stems from faith, vocation and state of life
- Association presupposes a freely made commitment.



Those who teach in Lasallian institutions are invited to learn more about these elements.

### **Visits to two Lasallian schools in San Francisco**

While staying in community with the Brothers, I was fortunate enough to visit two of their coeducational schools close by. They were polar opposites yet dedicated to the spirit of their shared ethos.

#### **Sacred Heart Cathedral Preparatory School**

- Secondary
- 1200 students
- High ratio of guidance staff
- Very high fees
- Four year levels - principally for university hopefuls

#### **De Marillac Catholic Primary School**

- Primary
- 120 students
- 30 staff (high ratio)
- Full fees paid (gratuitous)
- Principally to give the poor access to education.

These schools, while appearing to have little in common, are part of the larger Lasallian picture where a Christian and social education is offered to all. Communities that are able to pay make it possible in many instances for other schools to provide for the poor.

### **Educational politics**

During my conversations with other educators at Buttimer, two poignant factors emerged in relation to relationships. On the positive side, United States' schools seemed to have higher staffing ratios aimed at pastoral needs. In the case of the primary school, there were 30 staff for 120 students. Seemingly to undermine a climate of care however was the politics surrounding security of employment. Colleges had a President who was responsible for promotional work, employment of the Principal (the curriculum leader) and reporting to the Board. In too many instances, I heard of friction between the two, dismissals and teachers fearful of being told at the end of each year that their services would be no longer required. While one might argue that increased accountability could make for better teaching, the perception seemed to be that there was too much emphasis on budgets, a pervasive sense of uncertainty and unfairness and too much emotional energy put into employment survival in a vexatious environment. Creating positive staffroom relationships would seem to be a challenge in such a climate.

## IBSC (International Boys' Schools Coalition) Conference

This year the IBSC Conference was hosted by the City School of London. About 400 delegates gathered, among them 29 Kiwis from 22 New Zealand boys' schools. The theme of the gathering was "Inspiring Boys, Inspiring Schools". It is interesting to note that the IBSC was formed in 1995 partly in response to the public antipathy towards boys' schools. In their banding together however, these 200 schools found impetus to publicly proclaim what they knew to be true all along, namely that boys' schools were healthy places for young men to thrive and far from being boot-camps where physical control and aggressive behaviour were presumed by many to be rife, healthy relationships were promoted and celebrated.

The best workshop for me was titled ***Eliciting the Relational Dimension in Educating Boys***. It served as a follow up on a paper published in 2009, entitled ***Teaching Boys: A Global Study of Effective Practices*** that was compiled by IBSC members Dr. Michael Reichert and Dr. Richard Hawley. That study involved 1500 boys in eighteen schools over six countries and determined that it was the relationships of boys with their teachers that emerged as the most important aspect in providing an effective learning programme.

The researchers in this ongoing project presented a report on their findings and that led a discussion on how teachers forge and maintain productive relationships that support and motivate boys, and how schools can foster these relationship skills. For me the most useful slide featured the following somewhat obvious but quintessential elements bulleted below. The challenge for any school of course is to have all its teaching staff acknowledging students in this manner:



A teacher establishes effective individual student relationships by:

- Greeting and exchanging words with each student each day
- Learning, acknowledging, remarking on students' out-of-class interests, achievements and talents
- Being available and initiating individual help and counsel
- Noting and addressing student behaviour changes from day to day
- Noting how individual lessons are being received from day to day
- Modifying lessons and methods in response to student performance and appraisals
- Monitoring and responding to students' incremental progress day to day, week to week
- Sharing with students, personal experiences relating to one's own learning and growth
- Communicating to students how one came to know and love his/her scholastic subject
- Acknowledging one's own inspiring teachers and other significant figures in one's scholastic life

Another conference workshop on teacher appraisal thrust the concept of building trusting relationships into a whole new realm. Rokeby School, a learning community presented with many social and economic challenges, and previously one of the poorest performers in its district, had, with new management, risen to prominence as a local success story. One of the strategies credited with the transformation was the appointment of Student Lesson Observers. The scheme saw students applying for positions as observers. After parental consent was given, the successful applicants were given training prior to classroom visitation, observation and report writing, critiqueing the work of a designated teacher. The student would subsequently give oral feedback to the teacher. While one could suggest that student observers are non-expert, the humility asked of the teacher, the recognition of student as client with a valid opinion in the learning process and the willingness of both parties to work to improve teaching and learning, has to be acknowledged as a potential way to build stronger teacher/student relationships.

## Eton College excursion

As part of the ISBC Conference, an excursion to Eton, where their conference-attending Headmaster was kind enough to host us to an afternoon tea on the lawn, was offered to delegates. I was grateful for this opportunity and was once again reminded of the importance of relationships in a school community.



Contrary to my previous assumptions, the following were items of interest with respect to relationships and the school's operation:

- Fees at £27,000 were low compared to many other schools
- Educational facilities were modest with respect to equipment
- All live onsite - staff also
- Student selection is partly based on a boy's likelihood of taking up opportunities – “sparkle in the eye...”
- 1/3 of students are on some form of financial assistance
- Boys go periodically to their tutor's home for “private business” where they can share thinking and concerns in a more familial setting.

## Edmund Rice Centre – Waterford – Ireland

Having taught at St Kevin's College in Oamaru, a visit to the home town of the Founder of the Christian Brothers was a special opportunity. The museum dedicated to telling the story of the Christian Brothers and their global expansion and its adjoining chapel housing the remains of Edmund Rice, were worth the visit. His story has strong parallels to John Baptist de La Salle with his relinquishment of a privileged life to form a brotherhood to educate the children of the poor.

I was intrigued to find the teachings of De La Salle, whose birth preceded Edmund Rice's by 111 years, had formed the basis of the Christian Brothers' “rule”. This only served to reinforce for me how appropriate and timeless De La Salle's instincts had been. One of his mantras, inscribed around the font in the Christian Brothers' chapel, reminded me not only of him but of my links with my home school where this exhortation is often used.

Curiously, in the same town, stands the largest secondary school in Ireland, a Lasallian school, also founded to educate the poor. An interesting story with probable rivalry exists there surely?



## La Salle College – Kowloon - Hong Kong

My final stop was a five-day one with my friend and former colleague Brother Steve Hogan who is the recently appointed principal of the prestigious La Salle College in Hong Kong. This school is truly remarkable in many aspects, yet ready to benefit from a Kiwi educator's touch.

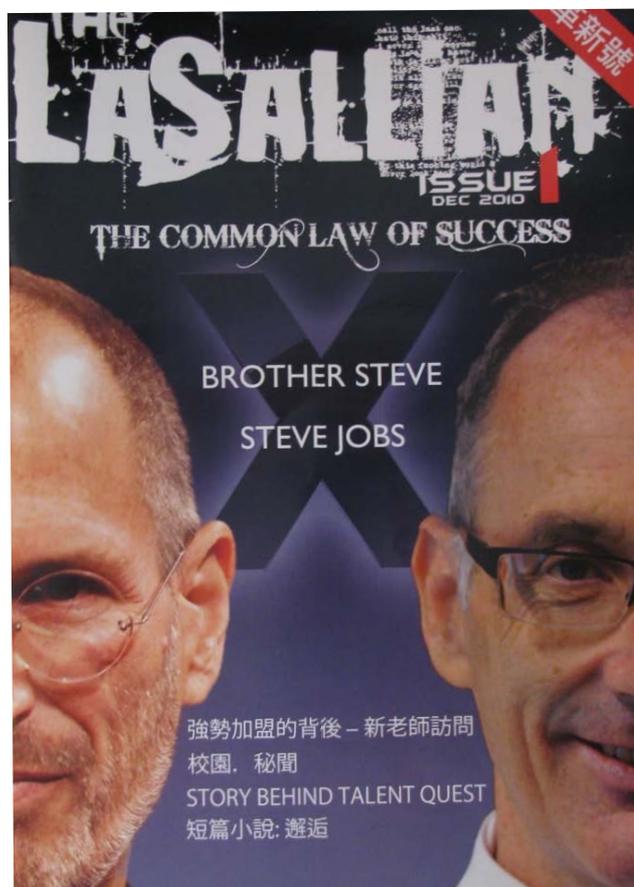
Its location in Kowloon, with a synthetic running track and an eight-lane swimming pool, mean that its real estate value is unimaginable. Added to that, its clientele compete all over China for entry since it is seen by many as the most prestigious boys' school in Asia - its graduates typically moving on to the premier American and British universities.

Seemingly anomalous to this is that attendance, in the spirit of John Baptist de La Salle, is free. Similarly to New Zealand Catholic schools, La Salle is government integrated meaning that parents cannot be charged fees. After La Salle has enrolled the most academically gifted, it must seem somewhat unfair that families who miss out have to present themselves to other schools in the city where the fees are considerable.

Brother Steve is marvelling at the calibre of the students, their application to their work and their accomplishments in music, drama and sport as well as their ability to organize themselves to produce professional publications. A dynamic PTA also has rooms in the school where they engage in learning activities and their modelling relationship with the school speaks volumes to the students.

The challenges for Steve Hogan lie in ensuring past glory does not breed too much comfort, that renovation occurs in aging buildings the community still sees as new, that replacement of a nine year old fleet computers in an asset rich-cash poor environment occurs, and that a more individualised Kiwi type approach to pastoral care and curricular guidance is encouraged.

The students are attuned to role modelled relationships as evidenced by their periodical magazine cover comparing their Steve Hogan to Apple's Steve Jobs.



## Conclusion

Inescapable in all my travels was the tenet that education and educators have to be positively relational. Educational institutions are set up through an altruism that has regard for the needs of others so that they may in turn serve the greater needs of society. Within these institutions, education happens best when teachers and students are able to relate as teacher and learner in a productive manner. This does not mean all teachers have to be youthful, extroverted, entertaining comical, push-overs - far from it. The liberating reality is that there are many ways of being effective through relationships. If educators are open to the needs of their students and devote themselves generously to providing in a manner that suits their own personality, success usually follows.

This was reinforced for me after reading SPANZ President Patrick Walsh's comment, in a recent newsletter. He wrote the following in reference to his attendance at a conference: *"A keynote speaker, Pasi Sahlberg, from Finland, a consistent top performing country in PISA results, advanced the thesis that Finland's success comes from a focus on creating 'a positive learning context' rather than a focus on academic achievement in itself. He suggested that if you concentrate on creating a caring school with an emphasis on positive relationships, a love of learning and targeted professional development, then academic achievement will naturally follow without having to get overly worried about it."*

In addition, this year's comparative report on Auckland secondary schools by *Metro* magazine (August 2011) awaited me on my return. It ranked Auckland schools in terms of academic performance and Catholic schools featured prominently. While modes and methods of comparison can always be questioned, it is difficult to dismiss these findings outright without feeling somewhat curious as to the existence of an underlying theme. Far from being selective, Catholic schools in this country pride themselves as being represented across all deciles and in being accessible to families since, in accord with the Integration Act, no fees are payable. For me, it is the emphasis on relationships, "together and by association" that is bearing good fruit. The *Metro* article included a list – *How to spot a good school* – offered by John Hattie. Most of his criteria emphasise relationships and resonate well with me:

1. *In the playground, do the students look each other in the eye? Or do they avoid each other?*
2. *Diversity breeds fresh thinking. Can they show you genuine evidence it's encouraged?*
3. *How do they measure success? By the achievement of the few or the many?*
4. *Ask to meet the best teacher. If they tell you they're all good they're not thinking clearly.*
5. *Who do the students turn to? Every student should have someone who knows how they (sic) are doing and will spend time with them.*
6. *Do new students make friends in the first month? It's a critical indicator of success: how does the school make sure it happens with all students?*
7. *Do they like mistakes? Learning starts from not knowing, so do they embrace that? Do students feel confident enough to confess to errors or not knowing something?*
8. *Are students "assessment capable"? Can they talk about how well they are doing?*
9. *Do they use acceleration? Are students able to learn at different speeds?*
10. *What feedback do students get? Ask one: what did you get told about your work today?*

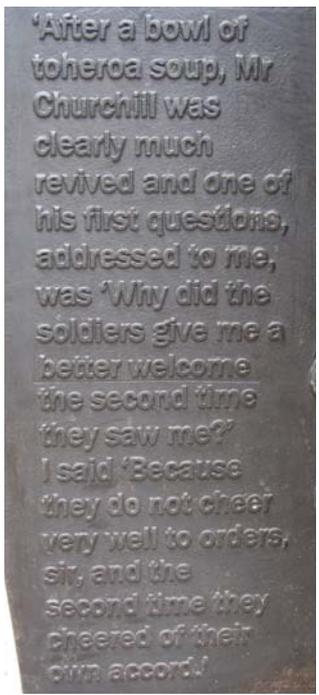
I leave the closing words to an inscription I photographed (at right) on one of the pillars at the New Zealand War Memorial at Hyde Park Corner. It explains how good relationships work in boys' schools, or in any school.

*"After a bowl of toheroa soup, Mr Churchill was clearly much revived and one of his first questions, addressed to me, was 'Why did the soldiers give me a better welcome the second time they saw me?' I said because they do not cheer very well to orders sir, and the second time they cheered of their own accord."*

### **Gratitude**

My sabbatical experience was a great gift. After ten years as a principal I am grateful for the experience that has left me refreshed and reinforced in my work. I extend my thanks to my accommodating colleagues, the De La Salle Brothers, the Francis Douglas Board of Trustees, the Lasalle House Board of Directors, the National Association of Principals of Catholic Secondary Schools (NAPCSS) and the Ministry of Education.

The sabbatical programme is a valuable one.



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