
Intersectionalities of Student Disabilities and the Lasallian Mission: Utilizing a Distinctive Lasallian Pedagogy to Foster Student Inclusivity

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Introduction

As defined by the "Americans with Disabilities Act," a disability is a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (ADA, 1990; Feldblum, Barry & Benfer, 2007).⁴ Individuals with disabilities constitute the largest minority group within the United States (United States Department of Labor, n.d.) and over 2.5 million students enrolled in postsecondary institutions self-identify as having a disability, representing approximately eleven percent of all undergraduate students registered in USA higher education (Synder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016; Synder & Dillow, 2015).

For students with disabilities,⁵ the presence of the disability may create additional obstacles when navigating within the college environment. Policies within postsecondary education assure the availability of support services to assist students in coursework and within their institutional community. Although disability accommodations are, in principle, available to increase equity between students with and without disabilities, there are various reasons why students with disabilities may not fully or consistently disclose their disability. There is evidence that students may be reluctant to reveal their disability status due to potential labeling, shame, or fear of resentment by other students (Coduti, Hates, Locke, & Youn, 2016; Demery, Thirlaway, & Mercer, 2012; Marshak, Van Wieren, Ferrell, Swiss, & Dugan, 2010). Students with disabilities have been stigmatized within the postsecondary environment, having this component of their identity viewed as an impairment and infrequently included within higher education's understanding of student diversity (Green, 2007; Kim & Aquino, 2017; Trammell, 2009). As a whole, students with disabilities have been impacted within the postsecondary environment both academically and socially, perceiving that their disability impacts their ability to integrate within the college setting (Aquino, 2016).

The mission of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools ("De La Salle Christian Brothers") is to "provide students with the skills and characteristics that allow them to access a great share of the goods requisite for a decent life" (McCallum-Ferguson, et al., 2017, page 11), with one of the overarching themes evident in Saint John Baptist de La Salle's ("De La Salle") educational approach as the centrality of the student. As Hengemüle (2016) stated in his work on Lasallian education,

In the Lasallian school, in effect, the center was the student himself, with his history, beginning with his origins in terms of genetics and environment; his own personality; his current and future needs and interests. In the Lasallian school, the point of departure, the center, and the destination was the good of the student. In the language of the Founder of

the Christian Schools, the teacher's role was not simply to give the student whatever education occurred to the teacher, or that he – the teacher – thought important, because the Lasallian Institute was born to give the student a suitable education (page 68).

This student-centered approach to education emphasized the importance of attracting individuals to enroll in the school system, retaining students throughout their studies, and fostering a desire for lifelong learning. This Lasallian belief and its associated core principle of quality education instilled the role of social justice within its early approaches to educational access. As such, De La Salle served as an educational visionary for accessible academic opportunities. As noted by Salm (1993), “De La Salle did not limit his educational vision to . . . schools for the poor. He realized that there were other needs . . . He pioneered programs in special education” (page 3). To date, there have been several texts related to Lasallian pedagogy and how members of Lasallian institutions can foster a supportive learning environment for all students, regardless of students' abilities and needs. However, scholars have yet to address how Lasallian pedagogy can apply, or be successfully utilized, for underrepresented student groups within postsecondary education. This essay explores how specific Lasallian pedagogical components can be applied to students with disabilities in the postsecondary environment.

Theoretical Frameworks

Human Variation Model of Disability

In defining disability, we encourage Lasallian educators to consider the Human Variation Model of Disability (Higgins, 1992). This model accentuates the variability inherent in disability as an extension of the natural variability associated within human experience. Disability in this context is a social construction caused by an organization's failure to respond to the variations that are inherent to its population due to negative perceptions or supposed lack of resources (Scotch & Schriener, 1997). Such indifference leads to the institutionalization of bias-laden practices that, at best, limits opportunities for individuals with disabilities and, at worst, establishes a culture of exclusion.

Minority Group Model of Disability

This essay was inspired by the minority group model of disability (Hahn, 1985). This model recognizes the intertwined relationship that exists between the overall perception of disability and the creation and implementation of disability policy (Hahn, 1986). Within this framework, individuals with disabilities are often incorrectly judged with a negative perception of disability perpetuated by existing policies and initiatives. The minority group model of disability identifies that “the opportunities of people with disabilities are limited far more by a discriminatory environment than by their impairments” (Scotch, 2000, p. 214). This theoretical framework acknowledges the structure of disability as an oppressed characteristic and recognizes the lack of equity for individuals with disabilities (Hahn, 1985; 1986; 1996). Specific to this essay, this framework provides a lens for further social justice exploration. Within the Lasallian higher education community, all student groups should be supported and advocated for, providing the opportunity for their learning, growth, and success. If a student group is not supported, or

perceives the environment as inequitable due to one's disability, it is necessary to stand against and remove this potential social injustice to better reflect and live-out the Lasallian mission.

Lasallian Mission and Historical Guidance

The teachings of De La Salle, and the associated pedagogical underpinnings of the Lasallian mission and framework, create a foundation for a supportive and accepting learning environment for all student levels and abilities. De La Salle's call to see each student as a child of God provides a theological basis for unwavering acceptance of individuals with disabilities. In *Meditation #80.3*, De La Salle writes:

You should, consequently, cultivate a very special tenderness for [your students] and procure their spiritual welfare as far as you are able, considering them members of Jesus Christ and his well-beloved. Faith, which should animate you, should make you honor Jesus Christ in their persons, and make you prefer them . . . because they are the living images of Jesus Christ our divine Master (as cited in Loes & Huether, 2007, p. 366).

It is with this historical context in mind that we explore seven components of the Lasallian pedagogy that directly support meeting the current needs of students with disabilities.

Inclusivity

De La Salle worked to assure that the social stratification of his day was not replicated in the educational system. Further, De La Salle insisted that the first Lasallian educators demonstrate always Christian decorum and civility. De La Salle described decorum and civility as “[arising] from sentiments of modesty, respect, union and charity toward our neighbor” (De La Salle, 1703, preface sections 1 & 9). He advocated for union with and inclusivity of people regardless of background. Extrapolating from this tenet, the Lasallian mission similarly calls for the elimination of educational stratification between students with and without disabilities.

Acceptance of Human Variation

In his thirty-third *Meditation*, De La Salle uses the parable of the Good Shepherd (*John* 10:11-16) to encourage educators to respect and respond to the variation that is present in their students:

In today's Gospel, Jesus compares those who have care of souls to a good shepherd who is very careful of his sheep. One of the qualities which Our Lord says distinguishes him is that he knows them all individually. This is also one of the essential qualities required of those who instruct others, for they must get to know their pupils, and discern the manner in which to act toward them . . . This varied conduct must depend on knowledge and discernment of character, and this grace you must beg of God most earnestly, as being one of the most essential for you in the direction of those over whom you have charge. (as cited by Loes & Huether, 2007, p. 91).

By accepting the uniqueness of each student and responding to variations in knowledge, skills, and abilities, Lasallian educators assure that each and every student learns well according to his/her ability

Customized Instruction and Varied Educational Needs

De La Salle observed that traditional schools did not always correspond to what students needed or wanted. Because of this, he intentionally developed an educational approach that catered to their needs. In recounting the Lasallian educational approach, Hengemüle (2016) noted how care was taken to provide programs applicable to students' situations, needs, and interests. The idea of tailoring the curriculum to meet student needs also required educators to incorporate various educational approaches to meet different abilities and to assess student's progress on an individual basis (Poutet, 2014). As Poutet (1995) observed,

At Saint Yon, with the various and different human groups that functioned simultaneously there, he [De La Salle] applied an intelligently differentiated pedagogy (page 85).

By applying this doctrine in the classroom, Lasallian educators can assure contemporary, relevant, and individual instructional content to meet students where they are.

Flexibility and Adaptability

The concept of flexibility is related to, but still distinguishable from, the idea of tailoring the educational needs to particular students. Flexibility requires an awareness of the times and a commitment to maintaining the balance between providing a liberating education and preparing students for the workforce (Schieler, 2018). As Hengemüle (2016) explains,

On the one hand, in Lasallian education, there were constant principles and precise regulations, defined ways of doing things. On the other, more than once, in paying attention to the needs of the students, to their characteristics and other circumstances, one sees that, along with this rigorous organization of the Lasallian school, there co-existed a true flexibility in structures, organization and practices (p. 76).

Thus, within the customized and tailored academic experience, educators were encouraged to adapt their classroom content on a regular basis to meet student needs and the changing demands of society. This ongoing cycle of experimentation, evaluation, and adjustment assures continuous improvement by learning from past practices and adapting to contemporaneous demands.

Integral Education and Attention to the Whole Person

Saint John Baptist de La Salle identified the need to educate the whole student. As Hengemüle (2016) explains, for De La Salle the notion of integral education related to the

harmonious development of the person in his various dimensions: physical, intellectual, emotional, social, ethical-moral, aesthetic, professional, [and] spiritual (page 35).

We would argue that part of a student's social and ethical-moral education is a respect for and appreciation of difference. Both students with disabilities, and their peers without disabilities, benefit from learning with and about each other. While attention to the individual was critical, it was also insufficient. Lasallian pedagogy takes a broader view of the student; one that includes areas beyond solely academics and considers the student within the larger context of family.

Preparing Students to Be Citizens

One of the cornerstones of De La Salle's mission was to educate students to be engaged in and a part of their local communities [at least as we understand it today] and more about social/socializing/being members of society), including developing and possessing the skills necessary to succeed in the workforce. Individuals with disabilities face particular challenges regarding entrance, retention, and success in the workforce (United States Department of Labor, 2018). The Lasallian mission dictates that the consideration of these skills be part of the higher educational system. By imbedding social and workplace skills acquisition into the educational process, Lasallian schools can further support all individuals within the learning environment and better prepare students to be successful and contributing members of society

Application of Lasallian Pedagogy

Some individuals with disabilities may face obstacles in meeting the role responsibilities associated with being a college student. Students with disabilities often experience dissonance between their abilities, their perceived abilities, and the expectations associated with higher education environments (Cahill, Rotter, Lyons, & Marrone, 2014). While it can be challenging for universities and faculty members to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities, the Lasallian mission and the pedagogical components associated with this tradition can be applied to students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions to address the issues of inclusivity, variation, flexible instruction, integral education, student-to-student interaction, and social engagement. We postulate that the Lasallian mission – and the corresponding pedagogical philosophies – make Lasallian institutions particularly well situated to assure a university that is a place that reflects and embodies the virtues of compassion, peace, acceptance, and respect (Rodríguez, 2009).

Creating an Inclusive Environment

Faculty members play an important role in establishing a climate that is welcoming of and inclusive to students with disabilities. Faculty attitudes and behaviors are frequently cited as key indicators of comfort for students with disabilities (Stein, 2014). However, faculty members are often unsure how to approach students with known or suspected disabilities. The literature suggests that students with disabilities prefer to interact with faculty members who demonstrate a desire to get to know them as individuals, are accessible and available to meet with them outside of scheduled class times, and demonstrate a desire for all of their students to achieve success (Stein, 2014).

Research suggests the significant benefits of training faculty who interact and instruct students with disabilities (see, e.g., Adams & Hayes, 2011). Additional training for faculty can increase

awareness of disabilities and provide guidance on how to approach, support, and accommodate students with known or suspected disabilities. Moreover, such education can address the negative associations and implicit bias toward students with disabilities by highlighting the positive attributes of neurological and intellectual diversity and the benefits such differences can bring to the learning environment.

Given that virtually all higher educational institutions have an office of disability, administration and faculty could partner with such an office to provide inexpensive training for its employees. This relatively simple step could foster a campus dialogue about the unique challenges and opportunities of educating students with disabilities.

Acceptance of Variation

To qualify and receive accommodations under the “Americans with Disabilities Act,” students are typically asked to provide documentation of their disability to an office of disability services (Lovett, Nelson, & Lindstrom, 2015). A counselor in a disability support office then engages in an interactive process with the student to select accommodations (e.g., extended time on tests, a note taker) and informs the course instructor. The student then notifies the instructor of the accommodations the student prefers to use for the specific course(s).

Some advocates suggest that requiring students to provide extensive medical evidence to document their disabilities and conditions perpetuates a view of disability that assumes deviance from natural human variation and undervalues the individual’s personal lived experiences (Association on Higher Education and Disability, 2012). This process is also thought to discourage students from obtaining accommodations for fear of being stigmatized or viewed as less than capable from school administrators and faculty (Stein, 2014).

A possible solution to this dilemma is to accept the student’s report of his or her needs and impressions from the university’s disability counselors as basis enough for accommodations (Association on Higher Education and Disability, 2012). If objective evidence is necessary to document a disability, time should be taken to understand the student’s lived experience and unique perspective. This flexible and interactive approach helps to assure a “targeted” approach that better meets the needs of the individual student.

Customized Instruction and Flexible Educational Approaches

Quality instruction for students with disabilities requires that faculty not only be knowledgeable of their content areas, but also familiar with effective instructional strategies. Understanding and appreciating human variation are at the foundation of building effective teaching practices. The use of universal design principles is a way that faculty can demonstrate an appreciation for human variation and how it is manifested in the classroom.

Universal design is an approach to constructing environments, assignments, and lessons in a manner that maximizes usability for as many individuals as possible. Instructors who adopt universal design principles critically examine their courses and consider ways to allow students to access instructional materials through multiple senses (e.g., PowerPoint presentations and

podcasts) and participate in a variety of different assessment methods (e.g., presentations, papers, group assignments). Using multiple means of engagement provides students with opportunities to build on their individual strengths and has the potential to mediate deficits (Lombardi, et al., 2011).

Attention to the Whole Student

The transition from high school to college life can be particularly stressful for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities experience a broad range of cognitive, social, and psychological challenges not faced at all, or to the same degree, as students without disabilities. These challenges can cause students with disabilities to struggle with confusion, a sense of being overwhelmed, depression, negative views of self, and feelings of incompetence (Vogel, Fresko, & Wertheim, 2007), which may contribute to higher attrition rates. Many colleges and universities focus solely on the academic needs of students with disabilities without regard to the whole student. An important aspect for all students, but particularly students with disabilities, is social participation. Among students with disabilities, social participation can foster a sense of belonging and inclusion (Vaccaro and Daly-Cano, 2015).

Given that students with disabilities often struggle with social issues, a possible entry point to address the whole student could be for disability offices to provide additional services to promote social interaction and participation. Such services could include a wider range of topics beyond traditional academic accommodations (e.g., how to be a good roommate or finding common interests with your classmates) and a larger number of opportunities (e.g., online tutorials, written materials, in-person sessions, campus fairs, and one-on-one consultations). Together the diverse offerings and increased quantity could provide multiple entry points to social participation.

Another way disability offices could support students with disabilities is to offer faculty mentorship programs. Faculty and student interaction is integral to student success especially for students with disabilities. With oversight from university disability offices, such programs could provide additional scaffolding for students in need.

Preparing Students to Be Socially Engaged in the Workforce

According to the United States Department of Labor (2018), individuals with disabilities often experience difficulty in obtaining and retaining employment. Further, even when such individuals do obtain employment, underemployment can be common (United States Department of Labor, 2018). These challenges present an opportunity for Lasallian universities interested in preparing their students for life beyond college. An obvious avenue for assisting students is the career services office. With additional training for university personnel, such offices can retool existing programs or expand offerings to assure that students with disabilities obtain focused attention on interpersonal skills, interviewing, and appropriate career options given their skill sets.

Conclusion

The distinctive Lasallian mission – with its focus on serving students in a differentiated, appropriate, and personalized way – provides the ideal backdrop for addressing the needs of students with disabilities. It allows for flexibility and adaptation of academic practices to meet student needs within the context of their current circumstances and those of the larger social framework. In theory, this pedagogical foundation can help students with disabilities to develop and hone the requisite skills for success in school, the workforce, and life. Additionally, the Lasallian framework supports the need for an equitable learning experience, regardless of a student’s abilities or need for additional support.

Despite a religious foundation that fosters a supportive environment for all students within the postsecondary setting, to date there has been no specific publication that the authors are aware of directly addressing how administrators and faculty members can support and advocate for the success of students with disabilities in the Lasallian higher education environment. In the development of his mission, De La Salle promoted the educational journey of individuals who were disadvantaged and needed flexibility for their academic success. Research notes that students with disabilities need additional support and guidance to successfully transition into, persist within, and graduate from the higher education environment (Megivern, Pellerito, and Mowbray, 2003; United States Department of Education, 2017). As such, because of the unclear guidance related to student disability within the Lasallian postsecondary environment, there is a need to explore how Lasallian higher education environments apply Lasallian pedagogy to support students with disabilities.

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Endnotes

1. Katherine Czado Aquino, an assistant professor at Saint John's University (NY), earned her doctorate in higher education policy from Seton Hall University. She worked previously at Manhattan College.
2. Susan Cahill, an associate professor and director of the MA in occupational therapy program (MSOT) at Lewis University, earned her doctorate in education from the University of Illinois at Chicago.
3. Carolyn Plump, an associate professor of management leadership at Lewis University, earned her law degree at Boston University Law School.
4. Although this journal usually requires that all citations use the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS) format, an exception has been made in this issue to allow citations to be made using the American Psychological Association (APA) format.
5. For this paper, disability was written as an aggregated component of a student's identity. Despite the aggregated sense of the term "disability," the authors recognize and acknowledge the diversity within this term. With each disability type (e.g., physical disability, learning disability,

etc.) comes its own characteristics and potential challenges. In order to provide an equitable environment for students with disabilities – regardless of the disability – the Lasallian community must be aware of the variation of and diversity within this student group.