
ANNOTATION

Pang, Alfred Kah Meng. "Called Forth by the Child to Teach: Lasallian Mysticism of Faith and Teaching for Children's Liberation." PhD dissertation, Boston College, 2020. 267pp.

Alfred Pang's dissertation is a monumental study of the educational and spiritual significance of the child (student) in the educational process, through the focus of Lasallian "mystical realism" (a concept introduced by Lasallian scholar Michel Sauvage, FSC, and further developed by Pang). Pang's writing offers the precise prose that one would expect in a doctoral dissertation; however, his writing is also beautifully lyrical, as seen in his reflections on De La Salle's *Meditations for the Feasts of Christmas and the Epiphany* (108-115 in Chapter 3 and, in particular 206-228 in Chapter 5). He unpacks key concepts such as teaching as vocation (11-38) and listening as critical practice (153-170) with clarity. He masterfully weaves the insights of others into a coherent vision of his own. There is, on the one hand, a passion to his arguments, as in his description of the child as revelatory of the mystery of God's presence (191), and, on the other hand, a rationality to his arguments, as when he critiques adultism that diminishes the integrity of the child (121-124).

Pang's dissertation shows a profound knowledge of Lasallian mission and charism, as they emerge from the life and writings of John Baptist de La Salle and the origins of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. He pulls the heritage into the present in a way that makes Lasallian pedagogy and spirituality understandable and relevant. He unpacks key Lasallian concepts such as vocation, education of the poor and social justice, the spirit of faith and zeal, interior prayer, and the presence of God in a profound yet clear way. He retrieves insights from Michel Sauvage, FSC, about "mystical realism" (94-99), from *Encountering God in the Depths of Mind and Heart* by Michel Sauvage, FSC, and Miguel Campos, FSC, in studying a Lasallian anthropology centered on the child (108, footnote 20), and from a variety of Lasallian scholars ranging from Luke Salm, FSC, to Léon Lauraire, FSC, to John Johnston, FSC. His ability to link the original sources to the Institute's 1966 *Declaration* and to Johnston's emphasis on the *Rights of the Child* is noteworthy and of assistance to Lasallians who might want to see the connections of the past to the present. Pang also offers a scholarly and critical view of De La Salle's thinking (124-132) concerning the nature of the child; this is a critique not often given and done through a philosophical and theological study of De La Salle's time. Pang notes the danger of De La Salle's thought leading to paternalism. Such a critique is necessary if a Lasallian pedagogy is to be useful today and is to be applied to the realities that face children and young people today.

It [this critique] is crucial if the prophetic edge of the Lasallian educational mission that makes an option for children is to be seriously sustained, sharpened, and refreshed. A Lasallian anthropology of belonging that embeds children as "being and belonging" must be careful not to equate their dependent interdependency in educational relationships with subordination that underestimates or negates their agentic capacity as meaning makers (133).

The methodology adopted by Pang for his dissertation is one of retrieval, critique, and reconstruction (6). In each of the five chapters of the dissertation he addresses a specific topic during which he offers a broad expanse of resources from which he has drawn (resources bridging theologians such as Karl Rahner and his theology of the child to Paulo Freire's critical pedagogical thought to Jonathan Kozol's critique of inner city schools to the listening strategies proposed by *(C)PAR (Participatory Action Research with Children)*). Though each chapter, filled with extraordinary insights, has an integrity and coherence in and of itself, Pang weaves the chapters together into a masterful and far-reaching exploration of the relationship of child (student) and teacher in an educational process that goes far beyond the traditional concepts of schooling.

In Chapter 1, Pang looks at "Re-Awakening Teaching as a Vocation" and recovers such ideas as teaching as prophetic witness, the preferential option for children, and prophetic mysticism as the spiritual capital for teachers.

In Chapter 2, Pang segues to "The Lasallian Educational Imagination" in which he revisits the life forces and events that marked De La Salle's entry into the world of education, the shift over time from De La Salle's concept of the poor child to a more radical contemporary interpretation of the child as poor and marginalized (drawn from the Institute's *Declaration* of 1966 and the writings of John Johnston, FSC), faith and zeal as a dynamic coupling that is organic to an apostolic and lay spirituality that is mission-oriented toward education, and "mystical realism" of Michel Sauvage, FSC. He concludes the chapter by stating:

In the Lasallian educational imagination, teaching children is holy work because the Holy One dwells in the child, who reveals our common belonging to God as children and siblings-in-Christ (101).

Chapter 3 offers an overview of a Lasallian anthropology of religious belonging. Pang moves the reader through a contemporary study of children and childhood in theological research, to De La Salle's conception of the nature of the child, to the vulnerability of the child that reminds the teacher of their own vulnerability. He summarizes Lasallian communal anthropology as: affirming the dignity of children as continual learners, creating an educational community of attentive adults, and developing a relationship of belonging and nurturing growth between child and adult that allows the child to exercise their own agency in responsible and life-giving ways (139).

In Chapter 4 Pang addresses "Listening to Children as Just Presence in Teaching." In this chapter he develops how "just presence" creates spaces for children's voices to be heard. "The sense of just presence in teaching is relationally ordered around whether and how educators see the full humanity of children by being with them. This seeing is the listening to children" (146). Using Freire and *(C)PAR*, Pang introduces practical ways that the teacher might listen to children and then moves the discussion to how the child is a "graced irruption," i.e., God breaks in and becomes unconditionally present in transforming and grace-full ways through the child as a person situated in society. The child is revelatory of God and calls the teacher to ethical action; hence, children can "form" teachers.

Chapter 5 looks at the teacher as contemplative. Pang draws from current "mindful teaching" perspectives and from the Lasallian heritage of interior prayer. The keen insights offered by Pang

in this chapter about the movement from the “teacher who prays” to “teaching as prayer” are profound (200-208). Based on De La Salle’s *Meditation on the Feast of the Epiphany*, Pang offers a model for the type of teaching he espouses, as well as some questions for teacher self-reflection (222-228). He concludes the chapter by examining Lasallian humility in zeal and wonder as holiness. Chapter 5 is a practical guide for teachers who wish to deepen their vocation; Pang offers four key commitments needed from teachers (230-231) and four ways to welcome, name, and nurture the spiritual as holy wondering with children (237ff).

In the *Epilogue*, Pang reflects on the contemporary situation (COVID and racial tensions) and posits the importance of Lasallian prophetic hope in living through these times – God will be there to meet teachers in the lives of children.

Although the focus of Pang’s study is on the child, much of what he says is applicable to older students, even adult students (people who frequently are vulnerable in their own unique ways). His reflections on the student/ teacher relationship are universally applicable to Catholics, non-Catholics, Christians, non-Christians, and even non-believers.

This dissertation is dense in its conceptual framework and, as such, the bibliography (250-267) is expansive in its Lasallian references, its theological references, and its references to the sociology of and philosophy of education.

Lasallian educators who are looking for challenges in how they view themselves and how they view their craft will find this dissertation of great worth both in how they perceive their Lasallian roots and how the Lasallian heritage does indeed speak to the contemporary needs of the world of education and the world itself.