

## THE SOURCES OF AUGUSTINE'S EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT

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### Abstract

*Augustine wrote many articles and books, and from these works, insights could be gotten as it concerns education. However, there are three books that Augustine wrote on education. The works include: The Teacher (De Magistro), Christian Teaching (De Doctrina Christiana) and The Catechesis of Beginners (De Catechizandis Rudibus). These three major works of his on education would be the focus of this piece. This study reveals that Augustine had a profound influence on the subsequent development of Western thought and culture and, more than any other thinker, shaped the themes and defined the problems that have characterized Western traditions. The hermeneutic method of inquiry would be employed.*

**Keywords:** Augustine, Educational, Insight, Sources, De Magistro, Doctrina Christiana, Catechizandis Rudibus

### Introduction

The major sources of Augustine's insight on education include: *The Teacher (De Magistro)*, *Christian Teaching (De Doctrina Christiana)* and *The Catechesis of Beginners (De Catechizandis Rudibus)*. These works were not written during the time of his career as a teacher. He wrote them after his baptism in 387 which marked the end of his teaching career. He returned to Africa to fulfill his dream of organizing a common philosophical life with his friends in his home town Thagaste. From Thagaste, providence brought him to Hippo where he was ordained a priest and later a bishop. It was during these periods that he wrote these works. Although Augustine had written so many works, and his educational ideas are scattered from his books to his letters, there were only three works that Augustine dedicated to discourses on education. These three major works of his on education would be the focus of this piece.

#### 1. The Teacher (*De Magistro*)

This was one of the early works of Saint Augustine. He wrote it at the age of 35 after his conversion, one year after he returned to Thagaste with his son Adeodatus. The work is a dialogue between a father (Augustine) and his son (Adeodatus), a son who is talented, beloved, and around eighteen years old at the time and who died shortly before the work was completed. While other

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works better introduce Augustine's theological thoughts or his public life as priest and bishop or his personal life, the *Teacher* reveals Augustine the philosopher. The major theme in the work is communication: between the student, the Interior Teacher and the External Teacher. In this piece, Augustine Christianizes Greek pedagogy, and employed the method of questions and answers which was used in schools at the time. In fact, this piece shows Augustine doing what Christian philosophers typically do. They attempt to integrate their Christian beliefs and philosophical reflections<sup>1</sup>.

According to Augustine, the external teacher, i.e., the parent or the professional teacher, is not really a teacher at all but one who serves. This role of the external teacher is to facilitate the dialogue between the student and Truth. The true teacher is the Interior Teacher, the God who is within. Augustine writes that:

We have Jesus our teacher inside each one of us. If you can't understand what I am saying, listen to the Christ who is in your hearts. It is this Christ who gives me the words to say and it is this Christ who will reveal deep inside your own self the message he wants you to get through hearing my words<sup>2</sup>.

The external teacher's basic function is to facilitate and remove obstacles to the encounter between the student and Truth. This perspective is based on Augustine's method which proceeds from the outside to the inside and from the inside upwards. For Augustine, education requires two dimensions to be realized:

- a. to open up the Truth to the student - this demands competence and professionalism - and;
- b. to open up the student to the Truth - this demands witness and the infectiousness of enthusiasm and love for the Truth on the part of the teacher.

This also implies:

- a. that the teacher also encounters the Truth - this makes the teacher a fellow student with his or her student. He wrote: "My friends, all of us stand before the same divine teacher as fellow pupils. The fact that we

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, R. D. (2015). Teaching Augustine's On the Teacher. *Religions*. 6. 404-408

<sup>2</sup>Augustine, St., *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 20.3

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bishops speak to you from this high podium does not make us your teachers. The divine one who lives in each of us is the teacher for us all<sup>3</sup>.

- b. that the teacher needs to have a personal relationship with the student to whom he or she is committed to helping, rather than merely to instruct or train.

Therefore, the success of education is not to be measured by the degree to which students become a copier or recorder in attitude and beliefs of the external teacher. Augustine writes:

Teachers do not claim, do they, that their own thought are preserved and grasped by the pupils, but rather the branches of learning that they teach, they transmit by teaching? For who would be so absurdly curious as to send his child to school to learn what the teachers think? But when they have explained, by means of words, all those subjects, which they profess to teach and even the science of virtue and of wisdom, then those who are called pupils consider within themselves whether what has been said is truth<sup>4</sup>.

The goal is clearly an unfinished project, since each one is on a journey of ongoing discovery and on a path to maturity which involves the uniqueness of each individual and their ongoing dialogue with the Interior Teacher<sup>5</sup>. It is in this regard that we can say that education never finishes, thus making the world a great classroom.

## **2. The Catechesis of Beginners (*De Catechizandis Rudibus*)**

Augustine's second work on education emerged between 400 and 405, when Augustine was between 46 and 51. It was written as a result of a request from Deogracias, a deacon at Carthage who was asking for practical rules from Augustine on how to carry out his responsibility of Catechesis. Augustine, therefore, responded to him with this work which has become a unique model of educational pedagogy. It is made up of two parts. The first borders on how to deal with the various problems that a Catechist could encounter while teaching. It touches on the relationship between the teacher and the student which Augustine considers fundamental in the learning process. He outlined these points for Deogracias:

1. the importance and the limitations of language used by the teacher,

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<sup>3</sup>Augustine, St., *Sermon 134*, 1

<sup>4</sup>Augustine, St., *The Teacher 14*, 45

<sup>5</sup> Morahan M. (2001). *Education: An Augustine Approach*. Villanova College: Australia.  
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2. the long term preparation of the teacher, as well as the teacher's immediate preparation for classes,
3. balance in the developing topics,
4. the pressing need to adapt one's teaching to the individual realities of particular students,
5. the trilogy of hear-listen-understand as the backbone of learning,
6. the need for love in the encounter with students and their particular needs.

In relation to the need for love, Augustine writes:

And if we pass through streets that are most familiar to us with all the cheerfulness that springs from well doing, when we happen to be pointing out the way to one who had been in trouble through losing his way, with how much more alacrity and with how much greater joy, in the matter of salutary doctrine, ought we to go over those things which, as far as we are concerned, need not be repeated, when we are escorting through the paths of peace a soul to be pitied, and one wearied with the wanderings of this world, at the bidding of Him who has given that peace to us<sup>6</sup>.

He teaches further:

Again, if it be distasteful to us to be repeating over and over things that are familiar and suitable for little children, let us suit ourselves to them with a brother's, a father's, and a mother's love, and when once we are linked to them thus in heart these things will seem new even to us. For so great is the power of sympathy, that when people are affected by us as we speak and we by them as they learn, we dwell each in the other and thus both they, as it were, speak in us what they hear, while we, after a fashion, learn in them what we teach. Is it not a common occurrence, that when we are showing to those who have never seen them before certain lovely expanses, whether of town or countryside, which we through often seeing already have been in the habit of passing by without any pleasure, our own delight is renewed by their delight at the novelty of the scene? And the more so, the closer the friendship between them and us; for in proportion as we dwell in them through the bond of love, so do things which were old become new to us also<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>Augustine, St., *On Catechizing the Uninstructed*, 12, 17

<sup>7</sup>Augustine, St., *On Catechizing the Uninstructed*, 12, 17

The second concerns Christian doctrines for the specialized world of beginners. It, therefore, concerns both the teacher and the student. The context within which these techniques are dealt with is the sacred stories of Christianity and the history of salvation. However, its insight into the nature of teaching and learning and techniques transcend the subject matter and can be applied to other contexts, especially where beginners are involved.

### **3. Christian Teaching (*De Doctrina Christiana*)**

This work was written by Augustine after 395, that is, after he was made a bishop. He was about 43 years old then, however, the work was not completed immediately; it was finished about thirty years later, around 440. As bishop, Augustine had a clerical community that he had formed, and this work was most probably meant for the formation of priests at Hippo. *De Doctrina Christiana* makes an explanation of the Christian doctrine, using the Scripture as a basis. However, interesting is the method of communicating knowledge that he proposes. He posits that educators need to offer an academic curriculum that responds to our diverse needs as human beings. These needs are revealed in our underlying restlessness and range from knowledge about our external world to the more deeply spiritual and religious knowledge.

He reflected on the relationship between the student and Truth. This relationship has three foundations:

1. **faith** in the human thirst for knowledge as the starting point,
2. **hope** creating desire to achieve objectives - as motivation for effort, and
3. a passionate **love** of Truth - like the force of gravity that attracts and energizes.

True educators, be they class teachers or the father or mother of a family, should keep in the forefront of their minds the students' internal dynamism and focus entirely upon it: stimulating the students in their capacity for wonder in front of mystery, promoting and encouraging their enthusiasm and accompanying them closely on the challenging path of discovering knowledge and wisdom while nurturing in this search a great love of Truth. According to Augustine, good example rather than great speeches, authenticity of life rather than formal commands, are decisive in this context<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Mendelson, M. (2010). *Saint Augustine*. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine>

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## Conclusion

The foregoing has studied three works of Saint Augustine of Hippo, who remains one of the foremost philosophers and theologians of early Christianity. He had a profound influence on the subsequent development of Western thought and culture and, more than any other thinker, shaped the themes and defined the problems that have characterized Western traditions of Christian theology and philosophy<sup>9</sup>. Augustine received a classical education that both schooled him in Latin literature and enabled him to escape from his provincial upbringing, creating a confident background for the importance of his works on education. His contribution to western civilization is evident in his philosophy of education which holds that: The teacher should help the student experience God; The teacher should take into account the unique characteristics of each student and relate to the students as unique individuals; Christian education should include the study of Plato, for most Christian doctrines were contained in his writings; Teachers must recognize the image of God in persons as their rational nature, thus it is to be used as a tool to relate them to God; Teachers should distrust the senses as a means to knowledge and use reason instead; In the tension between faith and reason, faith must predominate. The sources of his educational insights have been the concern of this piece, and it has studied three major works of Augustine, not disregarding the possibility of obtaining educational ideas from other works of Saint Augustine.

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<sup>9</sup> Israel Galindo, Sex educational principles from Augustine of Hippo. Retrieved 29/6/18 from <http://www.ctsnet.edu/six-educational-principles-from-augustine-of-hippo/2014>.

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