During the seventeenth century in Lyon, city-dwelling nobles and wealthy merchants often complained of children and parents “crying and wailing in the streets from hunger and the cold of the night.”¹ The streets were crowded with children who, raised by supposedly depraved parents from society’s lower sort, were destined to “become uncontrollable libertines, schemers, blasphemers, and fighters”² just like their parents. As Charles Arrault explained in 1746, poor and abandoned children were understood as “children of the state, and as such… they must be preserved for they are its strength and glory. Humanity begs it, religion demands it, and society benefits from it.”³ In order to assure “public tranquility” and “reduce the stress of the magistrates,” social welfare movements, such as the establishment of écoles de charité (charity schools) and Hôtels Dieu (hospitals), in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries initiated by the church, state, and local elites sought to teach children “in their infancy” to “respect God, magistrates, and law.”⁴

Disturbed by the “numerous poor children” who had “been long neglected by their parents,” the state, and the church which failed to provide “continual [and] necessary instruction throughout their young lives,”⁵ in 1664 Lyonnais priest Charles Démia drew up proposals to establish several écoles de charité for the children of Lyon’s “honorable poor.”⁶ Raising funds from the church, the

² Charles Démia, “Remonstrances faites à messieurs Les Prevost des Marchans, Echevins & Principaux Habitans de la Ville de Lyon touchant la nécessité et utilité des Ecoles Chrétiennes pour l'instruction des Enfans Pauvres,” 1668, 5D 7, folio 59, Archives Départementales du Rhône (ADR), Lyon. All translations are those of the author.
⁴ Démia, “Remonstrances,” 5D 7, folio 60, ADR.
⁵ Démia, Règlements pour les écoles de la Ville et Dioceze de Lyon (Lyon, 1681), 6.
⁶ Ibid, 8.
state, and local patrons including wealthy merchants and members of the nobility, Démia established sixteen charity schools in Lyon’s poorest parishes by 1689. Citing the Catholic Reformation’s initiative to “promote Christian education” and using his position as curé (priest), it was rather easy for Démia to collect funds – albeit rather limited – from the church. But why were the state and local wealthy elite so quick to provide Démia with the funds necessary to establish these écoles de charité?

Although historians such as Barbara Diefendorf, Jean-Pierre Gutton, and Elizabeth Rapley have all noted the establishment of écoles de charité in seventeenth-century France, these scholars have primarily concentrated on the schools’ collective association to a wider impulse of charitable giving spurred by the Catholic Reformation. They have not examined the specific dynamics or practices associated with the écoles de charité nor the relationship to the state, church, community, and family embedded in the routine life of these schools. This omission is not necessarily surprising as the history of seventeenth-century French education is usually eclipsed by attention to the earlier humanist movements of the sixteenth century and by the much more controversial educational reforms of the eighteenth century. The little work done on seventeenth-century education tends to focus on the university system and other forms of elite education such as tutors, convent schools, and tuition-based petites écoles (primary schools). It largely ignores the formal and informal educational practices of the majority of the population that was primarily comprised of people from the middling and lower sorts. The underlying assumption of the current educational historiography is then that ordinary, untitled, less privileged people remained completely uneducated throughout the entire early modern period until the Enlightenment. However, when we examine the source material left by “ordinary” early modern people, such as account books, rent books, receipts, passbooks, hand written memos, and letters it is obvious that these people had, at the very least, a rudimentary education.

This paper brings attention to and begins to fill that historiographical gap by focusing on Lyon’s charity schools to foreground the interests of the church, the state, and the local elite in fostering new generations of subjects and workers through social welfare projects. When examining the records of Lyon’s seventeenth- and eighteenth-century écoles de charité, including the official

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7 Two of the charity schools established before 1689 were female-only charity schools regulated by the same Bureau des Écoles and operating under the same regulations and with the same curriculum as the other fourteen charity schools. In the other fourteen schools, both boys and girls were admitted although the number of male students usually outnumbered the number of female students.

Règlements (administrative rules), royal charters, and a journal that served both as an account book and as a schoolmaster’s personal diary that includes lesson plans, class lists, and student evaluations, we can see how Lyon’s poor children were molded into active workers, subjects, and agents of the state and wealthy elite. Not only were students taught the catechism and how to read, write, and count in the charity schools, but they were also “taught to obey magistrates” and “laws of the city,” as well as to develop a “strict work ethic.” Therefore it can be argued the desired results of the écoles de charité were increased morality, productivity, and efficiency among the lower sorts. The charity schools became sites of social reproduction where ideals of the French state and local wealthy elite were imparted onto the children of the lower sorts.

Faced with what they saw as a large number of abandoned children, unemployment, and a seemingly morally corrupt poor, the Lyonnais elite felt social stability was beginning to deteriorate at the end of the seventeenth century. Although the church and the Hôtel Dieu offered some services to the poor, the sheer number of people requesting assistance simply overwhelmed these institutions resulting in increased vagrancy. Playing on the elite’s fears, in 1668 Démia presented an official proposal to Lyon’s Prévost des Marchans, Échevins, and Sa Majesté (Provost of Merchants, Municipal Councilmen, and His Majesty) in which he argued the “necessity and utility” of establishing schools in several Lyonnais parishes. Educating the poor, according to Démia, was of the “utmost importance of the state” since the poor made up the majority of the population. By providing education to these children, the “debauchery which undermined social stability could be eliminated.” Through various pedagogical exercises, including reading and writing assignments, the écoles de charité emphasized the importance of being “good servants of God, loyal subjects of His Majesty, and respectful members of their society.”

Démia’s appeals to the future of public safety and social stability appear to have been successful in raising support and funding from the wealthy and from the state. In several entries of the École Charitable de Saint Charles’s donation records, benefactors, such as widow Isabel Guidot and surgeon Julie Blauq, noted they donated funds because of the “school’s commitment to the elimination

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10 Charles Démia, “Remonstrances faites à messieurs Les Prevost des Marchans, Échevins & Principaux Habitans de la Ville de Lyon touchant la nécessité et utilité des Ecoles Chrétienennes pour l'instruction des Enfans Pauvres,” 1668, 5D 7, folio 60, ADR.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., folio 58.
13 Ibid., folio 65.
of vice among the poor.”\textsuperscript{14} The king recognized this as well in 1679 when he chose to bequeath a small building to the École Charitable de Saint Charles and provided funds to other Lyonnais charity schools. In a letter addressed to the “Maîtres des Écoles et Bureau de Saint Charles,” Louis XIV noted that “since the establishment of these schools [in Lyon] there has been a visible change in the popular conduct of the people.”\textsuperscript{15} Although promises of reducing vice, increasing morality, and creating a more Christian society were appealing to everyone, what seems to have been an even greater incentive in supporting the écoles de charité for the state and elite was Démia’s emphasis on “professional education.”\textsuperscript{16}

As a priest, Démia was undoubtedly interested in teaching children about Catholicism, but at the same time he also wanted to “equip the poor with the necessary skills” to provide for themselves “throughout their lives.”\textsuperscript{17} This meant charity schools not only served religious and moral purposes, but also practical ones, focusing on strengthening commerce, manufacturing, and trade. To prepare students for “apprenticeships, commerce, and service to the state,” students were educated in five major subjects: religion, reading, writing, mathematics, and craft skills necessary to particular trades.\textsuperscript{18} One of the prerequisites for attending a charity school was that parents, notably the father, had to be employed in an “honorable profession,” but be “unable to provide a reasonable education to his children due to his own lack of education and necessary funds.”\textsuperscript{19} Most students who attended a Lyonnais école de charité came from families with a father employed as a shoemaker, bricklayer, tanner, blacksmith, or a silk worker.\textsuperscript{20}

Originally, charity schools accepted both boys and girls in the same institution, dividing them into groups, known as bandes, based on their previous

\textsuperscript{14} Bureau de l’École, “Inventaire Général des Titres et Papiers des Écoles des Pauvres à Lyon,” 5D 1, ADR. The École Charitable de Saint Charles was the third charity school established in Lyon in the 1680s.

\textsuperscript{15} Letter signed by Louis XIV and Le Tellier addressed “Aux Maîtres des Écoles et au Bureau de Saint Charles,” 1679, 5D 6, ADR.

\textsuperscript{16} Gabriel Compayré, Charles Démia et les Origines de l’Enseignement Primaire, (Paris: Paul Delaplane, 1905) 23. The term “professional” does not insinuate the same type of education that elites received, such as training for careers in law or medicine. Instead, it refers to the acquisition of particular skills necessary for apprenticeship positions in silk work, tanning, bricklaying, construction, and other labor-intensive jobs.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Démia, Règlemens, 6.

\textsuperscript{19} “Livre des Comptes de l’argent recue pour la grosse dépense des Ecclesiastiques de la Communauté de Saint Charles,” 1678-1679, 5D 7, ADR.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
education levels and sex, not necessarily their age. However, students younger than seven and older than sixteen years old could not attend school. The *bandes* greatly differed from the organizational practices of tuition-based *petites écoles* (primary schools) that strictly grouped students into classes according to age. However, it was understood that students attending petites écoles would mostly likely have received an education from a tutor before entering school whereas the *écoles de charité* had no prerequisites. There were anywhere between four to eight *bandes* in most of Lyon’s charity schools depending on the number of students enrolled in the school. Démia believed that given “four or five years of continual schooling, children should have the capabilities and knowledge required to serve as an apprentice or employee in the professional arts and trades.” The goal of the *écoles de charité* was not to provide students with an “education in letters” like the petites écoles. Instead, charity schools understood that they must produce students who would be industrious, qualified, and loyal workers to strengthen the community.

In 1678 Saint Charles had five *bandes* for boys between the ages of seven and fifteen, and four *bandes* for girls between the ages of nine and fourteen. The average age of those enrolled in the *première bande* (first level) was nine years and thirteen years old in the *cinquième bande* (fifth level). Each *bande* had a different curriculum focused on what the students needed to practice the most. Instead of moving progressively through each *bande* step by step, students were evaluated at the end of a six-month period to determine what *bande* they should be moved to or if they needed to stay in the same *bande* for a longer period. In the first two *bandes* students usually had very little prior reading, writing, or math experience. Therefore, as Démania laid out in the school’s *Règlemens* (administrative rules), students in the *première bande* focused on learning the vernacular alphabet, reading fables aloud in French, and practicing to write their

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21 By 1689 Démania established two charity schools especially for girls. However, well into the eighteenth century, Lyonnais charity schools still taught boys and girls side-by-side in the same schoolhouses in parishes where an independent girls’ school did not exist. This suggests that the community was not particularly concerned about coeducation in the classroom or school. However, Louis XV’s administration appeared increasingly preoccupied by coeducation as numerous warnings were sent to the Maîtres des Écoles in the mid-eighteenth century, demanding that the schools segregate the classes according to sex.


23 “Livre des Comptes…,” folio 12, ADR.

24 “Livre des Comptes…,” folio 22, ADR. These ages (9 and 13) are much higher than in the *petites écoles* where the youngest student was typically 7 years old and the oldest student would usually have been 12.

25 “Livre des Comptes…,” folio 21, ADR.
names and small sentences. Unlike in the tuition-based petites écoles, students were not taught to read or write in Latin since “it would be of little practical use to them.” By the end of the deuxième bande (second level) students were expected to “read small stories, notes, letters, and other daily documents with little difficulty.”

In the troisième bande (third level), students started learning how to count on their fingers to ten, then to twenty, and then silently to fifty and one hundred. Attention was still paid to reading and writing, but more emphasis was placed on the basic rudiments of mathematics. Once students mastered how to count “by 2, by 10, by 20, by 50, and by 100,” they learned “how to compose the numbers on paper.” In addition to learning Arabic and Roman numerals, students were also taught how to write and translate chiffres de finance (finance or accounting numbers) that were used in account books, contracts, and other commerce documents. Students then advanced to practicing addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, usually mastering these before moving on to the quatrième bande (fourth level).

Students in the quatrième and cinquième bandes (fourth and fifth levels) used these newly developed skills to read business contracts, practice keeping account books, and make mock purchases and sales. The more advanced students divided their time between learning in the classroom and participating either in their family’s business, in a craftsman’s workshop, or in a manufacturing house as a quasi-apprentice. Although the students were not technically apprentices yet, they were exposed to the trades they would later be apprenticed into, allowing them to have shorter apprenticeships and for the craftsmen to take on more skilled apprentices. According to Saint Charles’s schoolmaster in 1679, “the requests of craftsmen and manufacturers to receive students from our school far exceed[ed] the number of students available,” suggesting that merchants, manufacturers, and craftsmen saw the advantages of educating these students.

Considering that during this same time Colbert was in the midst of reorganizing France’s finances to strengthen internal manufacturing and trade, it could be argued that by stressing these particular subjects and choosing students who were already familiar with specific trades from their parents, the écoles de charité worked to support Colbert’s economic reforms. In his “Memorandum on

26 Démia, “Chapitre III” in Règlemens, 12-22.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid. The subsequent information also comes from the same source.
30 “Livre des Comptes . . .”, folio 38, ADR.
31 Démia, Règlemens, 17.
32 “Livre des Comptes . . .”, folio 44, ADR.
Trade” in 1664, Colbert noted the need to “strengthen the manufacture and trade” of “clothes, ironware, silk, linens, paper, and soaps.” As mentioned, many students’ parents were employed in the silk industry that accounted for a large amount of Lyon’s exports. Several of the “Lettres Patentes de Sa Majesté” praised the écoles de charité in Lyon for creating “industrious workers and subjects.”

The schools “have lifted the spirits [of the poor] and made them more industrious and likely to serve in the arts and manufacturing [industries] after leaving school,” leading to increased “industry and trade in the region.”

Wealthy merchants and manufacturers also noted these advantages in the donation records to the schools. In November 1678 M. Pincet, M. Baillet, and M. Biller each donated four livres to the school and cited the institution’s reputation of producing “skilled, industrious workers” for their businesses as reasons for continued support to the École Charitable de Saint Charles. In a report to the Prevost of Merchants, Municipal Councilmen, and “notable residents” of Lyon in 1681, Démia wrote “little by little [Lyon’s] workshops and manufacturers replace[d] their workers with well skilled, loyal apprentices.” After this report donations from wealthy investors increased to their largest amount, with over 47 people donating between 4 and 200 livres to Saint Charles in October 1682. Lyon’s écoles de charité were proving to be valuable investments for the city’s wealthy and for the state.

Although children were the only ones who attended school, these institutions also had wider effects on the poor community. An official letter from Louis XIV to Démia in 1681 mentions the positive effect schooling had not only on Lyonnais children but “also on their parents [who were] more industrious and skilled than before,” and who “had learned Catholic morals and respect for magistrates from their children.” In the registers of Lyon’s écoles de charité, Démia indicates these schools “were instituted not only for the children [of Lyon]

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34 “Lettres Patentes de Sa Majesté pour L’Etablissement du Bureau des Ecoles à Lyon,” 1681, 3GG 150, AML.
35 Ibid.
36 “Livres des Comptes...,” folio 42, ADR. These men were repeat donors, giving about 4 livres every month to the school. According to the donation records, 4 livres could support one student for about 18 days. Considering that school was only in session for about 20 days per month, this money was usually more than sufficient.
37 As quoted in Compayré, Charles Démia, 24.
38 Bureau de l’École, “Inventaire Général des Titres et Papiers des Écoles des Pauvres à Lyon,” 5D 1, ADR.
39 “Lettres Patentes de Sa Majesté pour L’Etablissement du Bureau des Ecoles à Lyon,” 1681, 3GG 150, AML.
but also to try to provide an education to their parents."\(^{40}\) In order to send their students to school for free, parents had to comply with regular inspections from the schoolmaster. These inspections were usually conducted in May, September, and one other month of the schoolmaster’s choosing.\(^{41}\) During the first interview schoolmasters examined the parents’ knowledge of “the catechism, reading, writing, civility, spelling, and general skills.”\(^{42}\) The father or male head of household, possibly a brother or uncle, had to provide “proof of employment” by taking the schoolmaster to his “workshop, factory, shop, or place of work.” The mother was not required to show proof of employment, but she was judged on the quality of house she kept. If the house did not include “adequate sleeping quarters, reasonable food, and an environment to foster Christian learning,” a child could not attend an *école de charité* until the “mother had attended to these issues.” Siblings and any other family members or household members might be interviewed as well though not with as much vigor as the parents. At every subsequent visit, parents, siblings, and other household members were required to “demonstrate proper and improved Christian comportment, continued employment, behavior appropriate of a loyal subject of His Majesty, and advancement in reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic.” If parents, siblings, or other household members did not show improvement or continued success in these areas, students would be encouraged to “attempt to engage their families more in their studies.” It was the responsibility of the students to act as teachers to their families. Charity schools became sites of social reproduction where children were molded into loyal subjects and active agents who in turn imparted the ideals of the church, the state, and the local community onto their parents. It was understood that these students had the responsibility of “elevating the morality, Christianity, and education” of their entire family, improving the lower sorts literally from the bottom-up.\(^{43}\)

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Démia’s experiments in Lyon’s poorest neighborhoods with the *écoles de charité* proved successful in providing a new generation of loyal Lyonnais subjects and skilled workers. The state continued to support the Lyonnais *écoles de charité* until 1789 with the fall of the Ancien Régime. Private investors, most notably workshop owners and master craftsmen, continued to support the schools through monetary donations, buildings, and apprenticeships throughout the eighteenth century and even into the nineteenth century. While Lyon’s *écoles de charité* had a profound impact on the city, they were also used as models for other education institutions.

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\(^{40}\) Démia, “no. XXIX,” in *Règlemens*, 32.

\(^{41}\) Démia, “no. XXXII,” in *Règlemens*, 34.

\(^{42}\) Démia, “Avis au Lecteur: Visite Générale des Parens,” in *Règlemens*, 57-62. The subsequent advice to parents and quotations all come from this source.

\(^{43}\) “Livre des Comptes…,” folio 51, ADR.
throughout France by various clergymen, religious orders, and even by the filles séculaires. With the establishment of *écoles de charité* across France, education was no longer restricted to just those who could afford to pay high tuition or the services of a private tutor. Instead, education came to be understood in the “enlightened” eighteenth century not as a mark of status but rather as an issue of “civil importance and concern.”