

## THE CHILD-CENTERED EDUCATIONAL APPROACH OF DON GIOVANNI BOSCO

**APOSTOLOS KARAOULAS**

Laboratory Teaching Staff, University of Ioannina, School of Education Sciences,  
Department of Early Childhood Education

<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJREHC.2024.5612>

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines Don Bosco's educational approach and its ongoing relevance in contemporary education, drawing on bibliographic sources. It highlights how his principles integrate lessons from the past with modern educational practices, emphasizing their enduring value and contribution to the evolution of the educational process. Don Bosco's pedagogical philosophy, grounded in the "Preventive System", introduced a humanitarian approach focused on creating a safe and supportive learning environment through love and understanding, as opposed to the punitive methods prevalent at the time. Despite social and educational developments since the 19th century, Don Bosco's principles remain significant as they are implemented in schools across over 130 countries. Modern educational institutions adhering to his pedagogical theory blend traditional values with contemporary technologies and teaching methods, promoting students' personal development through innovative approaches. The assessment of the success of his pedagogical approach highlights the lasting importance of humanitarian education and underscores its ability to adapt to current educational challenges, continuing to positively influence learning environments globally.

**Keywords:** Don Bosco, Preventive System, Humanitarian Education, Enduring Educational Value, History of Education

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Education, as a fundamental pillar of social development, has evolved over time, adapting to the needs of different eras and societies. From ancient Greece, where education focused on the development of the citizen and philosophy, to the creation of modern educational systems, the educational process has remained an integral part of cultural and social progress. Over the centuries, various philosophies and teaching methods have emerged, influencing the approach and function of educational institutions.

One of the most significant figures in the field of education is Don Giovanni Bosco, who established the "Preventive System" during the 19th century. His approach emerged within a framework of social and economic challenges, where young people often faced the consequences of the Industrial Revolution. Drawing from his own experiences and the essential needs of youth, Don Bosco emphasized the importance of love, understanding, and preventive care in education. Rather than relying on disciplinary measures, as was customary, he promoted the creation of a supportive learning environment where students could develop holistically.

Don Bosco's philosophy, rooted in the "Preventive System," combines humanistic values with innovative educational practices. Despite the social and educational advancements since the 19th century, his principles remain significant and are applied in over 130 countries. Modern educational institutions that follow his pedagogical theory incorporate traditional values with contemporary technologies and methods, fostering the personal development of students.

An analysis of his pedagogical philosophy highlights its adaptability to modern educational challenges, underscoring the enduring importance of humanistic education. His approach continues to positively impact learning environments worldwide, providing a solid foundation for creating positive learning experiences that empower students and prepare them for the future.

## 2.0 BIOGRAPHY AND WORK

Don Bosco was born on August 16, 1815, in the I Becchi district of Castelnuovo d'Asti (now Castelnuovo Don Bosco) in Italy, at a time of great social and political upheaval. Nineteenth-century Europe was in a transitional phase, with the effects of the Napoleonic Wars impacting political stability and social cohesion in Italy and other countries (Stella, 1985).

Italy in the 19th century was fragmented into various kingdoms and states, with local rulers and foreign dominance in many areas of the country. Political instability was widespread, leading to the gradual unification of Italy, known as the Risorgimento, which was completed in 1861 with the founding of the Kingdom of Italy. However, this political unification was not immediately accompanied by social and economic prosperity for its population. Instead, the newly unified Italy faced severe social inequalities, poverty, and high levels of illiteracy, particularly in the southern and more remote rural areas (Duggan, 2007).

Alongside these political changes, the Industrial Revolution brought about major shifts in Italy's social structure, with deep and lasting effects as it began to shape new conditions of life and work, especially in urban centers. People were moving en masse from rural areas to cities in search of jobs in the emerging factories and industries. Although rapid urbanization contributed to economic growth and population increase, it also created serious social problems. Factory conditions were often unhealthy and dangerous, with low wages, long hours, and child labor being common practices. Young people, especially those from poor families, were particularly vulnerable to this environment, as many ended up homeless or involved in delinquent activities (Hobsbawm, 1996; Allen, 2017).

In these social and economic conditions, Don Bosco took action to support the youth of his time, who were largely neglected and marginalized. Within this setting of social disarray, the need for a new educational approach that addressed the real needs of these young people became imperative (Stella, 1985; Weinschenk, 1987).

The educational approach of Don Bosco's era was characterized by strict, repressive, and punitive practices that focused on punishment and behavioral control. Teachers used punishment as a primary means of control and discipline, imposing harsh penalties to manage the "bad" behavior of their students. School practices included corporal punishment or isolation to enforce strict discipline and ensure compliance with rules (Braido, n.d.; Stella, 1985). The focus on behavior management often ignored the emotional and psychological needs of

students, failing to create a supportive environment conducive to their personal and emotional growth (Stella, 1985).

In contrast to repressive pedagogy, his preventive approach presented a radically different model. He promoted an educational philosophy based on love, understanding, and care, recognizing the importance of emotional support and the psychological well-being of students. Rather than focusing on discipline through punishment, his method aimed to create a positive and encouraging environment that fostered personal development and social integration for children (Stella, 1985).

After completing his studies and ordained a priest, he began working with young people living in difficult circumstances, especially in the industrial city of Turin, Italy. Shocked by the hardships faced by young people, he founded the Salesian Catholic monastic order in 1859, formally known as the Salesian Society of St. John Bosco. He named the order "Salesians" in honor of Saint Francis de Sales, whom Don Bosco admired for his gentle and accessible approach to people (Ceria, 2003).

Saint Francis de Sales founded in 1610 the order known as the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary, with nuns called Visitandines who followed the saint's tradition of cultivating a spiritual life devoted to the Holy Mother. The order's educational philosophy was deeply connected to values of humility, piety, and love for one's neighbor. The Visitandines promoted education as a means of moral and spiritual growth, emphasizing not only academic achievement but also the cultivation of moral and religious values (Phelan, 2021).

Within this framework, from the 17th century onward, the Visitandines founded many schools across various countries, focusing on the education of girls. Their approach was multifaceted, including religious education, language studies, arts, and home economics (Rapley, 1990). The schools they established were considered pioneering for their time, as they offered women the opportunity for substantial education in an era when women's education was limited. Their educational work had a significant social impact, as it contributed to women's empowerment and the formation of a new generation of educated and morally oriented women who could play an active role in society (Moran & Pipkin, 2019).

The profound influence of Catholic tradition, combined with the religious environment in which Don Bosco grew up, significantly shaped his beliefs, thoughts, and values in his educational mission. In 19th-century Italy, the Catholic Church played a central role in both society and education. However, the Church was in a period of reform and faced challenges as it struggled to maintain its influence against the growing trends for secular education and political independence from religious institutions (Stella, 1985).

Religious education at the time focused mainly on teaching the basics of faith and maintaining moral values. However, traditional teaching methods were often strict and disciplinary, with an emphasis on punishment as a means of enforcing order. In contrast, Don Bosco adopted a different approach based on love, reason, and personal connection with young people. He created an environment where students felt safe and supported, offering them a haven for learning and growth, both spiritually and socially (Braido, n.d.).

With this devoted approach, Don Bosco dedicated himself to children and pedagogy, guided by a deep sense of social justice, religious mission, and personal experiences that motivated him to devote his life to educating and caring for young people. Born into a poor farming family in Piedmont, Italy, he experienced first-hand the difficulties faced by children growing up in poverty and social marginalization (Stella, 1985). His father's death when he was only two years old and his upbringing by his mother in conditions of hardship made him understand the challenges faced by children who lacked family support and guidance (Braido, 1999).

From a young age, he showed a particular interest in children and religion, and his desire to help young people was strengthened by his religious beliefs. Growing up, he witnessed the harsh reality of the Industrial Revolution, which left thousands of children and young people exposed to poverty, exploitation, and crime on the streets (Salesian Missions, n.d.). His drive to provide meaningful support stemmed from his own experiences in 19th-century Italy, where social and economic turmoil created a large population of children living on the streets, without family care or education. Inspired by the desire to help these young people and with deep religious faith, he decided to dedicate his life to their education and spiritual guidance (Ceria, 2003).

His personal dedication to the religious mission and commitment to social justice strengthened his motivation. He was convinced that education and moral guidance could offer children a better life and protect them from crime and exploitation. One characteristic example of his approach is the story of Bartolomeo Gallerani, a child who had been rejected by the church sacristan where Don Bosco worked. While the sacristan had dismissed the child as unsuitable, Don Bosco welcomed him with love and care, providing shelter and education to Gallerani and other young people in similar need. This act reflects the principles he later applied in his preventive pedagogy, incorporating love, reason, and understanding, with an emphasis on prevention and support rather than punishment and rejection (Braido, 1999). Don Bosco believed that through education, moral, and spiritual guidance, young people could develop their potential and escape poverty and social marginalization (Stella, 1985).

She used a variety of methods to reach the children and encourage them in their learning and socialization process. One of these methods was magic tricks, a creative and enjoyable technique to capture children's attention and create a positive atmosphere around educational activities. He was known for his ability to combine learning with entertainment, using fun activities to gain sympathy and trust of the children. This approach allowed him to connect emotionally with children, making education more appealing and engaging. He particularly valued the liveliness and energy children brought to school activities, recognizing that a joyful atmosphere contributed to creating a supportive learning environment (Stella, 1985; Salesian Missions, n.d.).

As his educational activities expanded and the number of students increased, Don Bosco realized that he could not manage the pedagogical work alone. He recognized the need to recruit and train collaborators, integrating them into his broader educational plan. He presented his collaborators with a set of basic principles that defined his teaching and pedagogical approach. One of the key aspects of Don Bosco's philosophy was the principle of a "new beginning" for every child, regardless of their past. He emphasized that all students should be treated with equality and fairness, offering them new opportunities for growth and education, without

prejudice based on family or social background. This principle highlighted the need to give each child the chance to start afresh, ensuring that everyone had the same opportunity to progress and develop (Stella, 1985).

Another point he believed in was that education is shaped not only through formal teaching but also through daily activities, games, and social interaction. He stressed that the educational process should integrate every aspect of children's daily lives, including recess and games, which he saw as necessary for the holistic development of young people (Weinschenk, 1987).

He also recognized the importance of vocational training and wanted to equip young people with technical and professional skills that would help them gain autonomy and find jobs in their future lives. The vocational schools and workshops he established aimed to provide practical skills and knowledge with which young people could enter the workforce (Lenti, 2010).

One of the fundamental principles of Don Bosco's preventive pedagogy was preventing problems through love, care, and positive interaction, rather than punishment. He created an environment where students could feel safe and supported, which he considered essential for the success of education and personal development (donboscowest.org).

### **3.0 THE SALESIAN PREVENTIVE SYSTEM OF SAINT JOHN BOSCO**

Don Bosco's "Preventive System" was shaped around the principle that prevention is more effective than suppression, focusing on creating a supportive environment filled with care and love for the development of children. Recognizing the need for a holistic approach to education, Don Bosco combined three core values: love, reason, and religion.

According to his philosophy, love and support were fundamental to children's development. Instead of imposing strict punishments, he used positive interaction and personal care to guide students, thereby creating a positive learning environment where participation in activities like theatrical performances and sports was integrated into the educational process (Bosco, 2007; Lenti, 2010).

Reason and explanation were also central to his approach. Rather than using punishments, Don Bosco preferred to discuss students' mistakes with them and explain the consequences, promoting understanding and empathy (Stella, 1985). His teachers engaged with students about the challenges they faced, focusing on the causes of behavior and providing guidance for conflict resolution.

Additionally, religious guidance was essential for the overall development of children, promoting moral values such as honesty, solidarity, and discipline. Don Bosco also established workshops and technical schools for the vocational training of children, offering them practical skills for the job market. A notable example is the "Fabbrica di Calzature" (Shoe Workshop), where students participated in shoemaking, gaining hands-on experience (Salesian Missions, n.d.)

By applying these principles, Don Bosco's "Preventive System" focused not only on education but also on creating a supportive and encouraging environment for children. His ultimate goal

was to prepare young people to become responsible and active citizens with strong moral values and a developed social consciousness.

#### 4.0 APPLICATION TODAY

Don Bosco's pedagogy continues to have a significant impact and application in 21st-century education. The principles of the "Preventive System" are integrated into many contemporary educational practices, especially in schools focused on supporting children from vulnerable social groups or in schools with a religious orientation. Educators in these schools typically possess specialized knowledge and skills, allowing them to blend Don Bosco's core principles with modern pedagogical practices. They often apply an experiential and enriched pedagogical approach, integrating modern methods that promote collaboration, active student participation, and personal development, thereby merging Don Bosco's traditional principles with advanced techniques in contemporary education (<https://www.boscocatholic.org>).

Moreover, many of these educators have training in counseling and psychology, enabling them to provide emotional support and manage behavioral issues using positive strategies. Such strategies include reinforcing positive behavior, applying preventive interventions, and developing strategies for student self-regulation. The educators' expertise has led to the adoption of pedagogical practices such as positive reinforcement and conflict resolution strategies, incorporating principles of positive reinforcement and effective behavior management (Stella, 1985).

Modern educators also adopt strategies that encourage cooperation and participation of students. Techniques like participatory teaching, where students play an active role in organizing learning and decision-making, are central to this approach (Lillard, 2011). In this way, Don Bosco's principles are combined with modern practices to create a supportive and participatory learning environment.

Modern pedagogy, influenced by Don Bosco's preventive approach, has been adapted to meet today's educational needs and challenges while retaining its foundational principles. In this process, educators integrate modern methods that enhance experiential learning, allowing students to actively participate in education through hands-on activities and interactions. Promoting student autonomy and responsibility fosters active participation and personal growth, fully aligned with Don Bosco's principles of student empowerment and active engagement in the educational process. The modern application of Don Bosco's pedagogy demonstrates that his principles remain relevant and beneficial, contributing to a supportive and comprehensive educational environment that promotes active participation, autonomy, and moral development (Vojtáš, 2022).

In the modern era, his pedagogy combines religious and moral values with contemporary tools, offering a holistic approach to students' moral education and spiritual development. In schools with a religious character, the preventive pedagogy integrates modern practices, blending religious education with strategies that promote students' personal growth. The holistic approach focuses on creating a supportive environment where behavioral issues are prevented, and student development is encouraged through positive reinforcement, active participation, and the cultivation of personal skills (Salesian Missions, n.d.).

Don Bosco's philosophy continues to be applied today through educational institutions that adopt the principles of prevention, love, and moral and spiritual guidance. Schools following the "Preventive System," like Salesian schools, are the most representative example of this pedagogical approach. In these schools, there is a strong emphasis on prevention through building positive relationships, providing individualized support and engaging students in activities that enhance their personal development and social inclusion. Personalized education involves tailoring assistance to the specific needs of each student, helping them develop their abilities and integrate socially. Educators in these schools strive to create an environment in which students feel supported and guided, embodying Don Bosco's philosophy of an educational process based on love and support (Vojtáš, 2022).

At the same time, modern schools implementing the "Preventive System" emphasize creating a supportive and safe school environment. This is achieved through integrating positive reinforcements and encouraging students to participate actively in decisions affecting the school community. This approach strengthens students' sense of "belonging" and responsibility, fostering a positive school culture that promotes their growth and well-being (Endres, 1961).

International Salesian schools, such as Salesian College in Australia and Salesian High School in Italy, continue to incorporate and apply the principles of Don Bosco's "Preventive System." These schools focus on building supportive communities and providing professional and technical skills through practical courses, ensuring students are prepared for the future (boscocatholic.org).

Additionally, the educational programs in these schools include activities that encourage student involvement in extracurricular activities, such as social work, art, and sports. These activities contribute not only to students' social integration but also to the development of life skills and moral values, thereby promoting a holistic approach to education (Braido, 1999).

The appeal of Don Bosco's pedagogy is evident in the continued adoption of his principles in contemporary educational practices. Schools implementing the "Preventive System" report increased satisfaction levels from both students and parents, as well as significant improvements in students' social integration and personal development. This approach fosters a positive school climate that promotes collaboration, support, and mutual understanding, making Don Bosco's philosophy not only timeless but also essential for successful education today (Vojtáš, 2022).

One of the most representative examples of this pedagogical approach is the Don Bosco School in Munich. This school combines the traditional values of the "Preventive System" with modern educational practices, creating a framework that integrates innovative teaching methods. Emphasis is placed on behavior management strategies focusing primarily on prevention and positive behavior reinforcement through reward systems and positive feedback. At the same time, the school seeks to build a supportive school community where students feel a sense of belonging, and staff work closely to support students' individual needs, fostering empathy and social understanding.

In this context, school activities are designed to promote experiential learning and the personal growth of students. Students participate in a variety of activities, such as theater productions,

art workshops, and sports, which enhance social skills and support their personal development. Simultaneously, educational programs combine academic education with vocational training, allowing students to engage in practical courses and workshops related to various professional fields (Endres, 1961).

Furthermore, the school does not limit itself to academic and vocational education but also provides individualized counseling and psychological support. Specialized counselors and psychologists work with students to address personal and academic issues, while conflict management strategies promote peaceful conflict resolution. In the same spirit, teachers are trained in dialogue and mediation techniques to enhance the effectiveness of these strategies. Additionally, the school integrates modern technology into teaching, using digital tools and platforms to enhance the learning process. The educational programs combine traditional teaching with contemporary methods, such as project-based learning and the incorporation of creative thinking and critical analysis (Campus Don Bosco, n.d.).

Focusing on early childhood, Casa Don Bosco in Munich serves preschoolers, offering an educational environment that integrates Don Bosco's principles with modern teaching methods. The school's program focuses on the holistic development of young children, emphasizing creativity and artistic expression. Through activities such as painting, music, and theater, children are encouraged to develop their imagination and fine motor skills. The integration of these activities is essential for the development of young children, contributing to their overall growth (casa-donbosco.de).

Play-based learning, a core element of Casa Don Bosco's program, plays a significant role as well. These activities encourage social interaction and cooperation among children while enhancing social skills and conflict-resolution abilities.

Casa Don Bosco also places importance on the physical development of children. Through physical exercise activities, preschoolers are encouraged to improve their physical fitness and motor skills, promoting their overall well-being and health.

Finally, early learning experiences are an integral part of the educational program, with activities that help children develop basic skills through exploration and participation in various educational activities. School teachers provide continuous support and guidance, creating a positive and supportive environment that encourages the development of children's self-esteem and emotional well-being.

Casa Don Bosco combines Don Bosco's philosophy with modern pedagogical practices, providing preschoolers with an environment that promotes their comprehensive development through creativity, social interaction, physical activity, and early education (Casa Don Bosco, n.d.).

## 5.0 CRITICAL VIEW -CONCLUSIONS

Don Bosco, founder of the Salesian Order, revolutionized 19th-century educational philosophy by introducing the "Preventive System," which focuses on prevention through understanding, love, and support rather than suppression. Although his era's conditions were different, his



principles have proven highly relevant and effective in modern education, explaining the global spread and success of his schools.

Today, schools founded on Don Bosco's philosophy operate in more than 130 countries worldwide. Their ongoing success is closely linked to their ability to adapt Don Bosco's traditional principles to contemporary educational needs. These schools combine a human-centered approach to education with the latest technological and pedagogical advancements, creating a flexible and dynamic learning environment. They maintain their timeless value, even in an era where social values and principles are not necessarily Christian, because their educational philosophy focuses on universal human values.

The ecclesiastical principles and values of the modern Western world, despite their apparent differences, share a common goal: to serve humanity and promote well-being. While ecclesiastical values are rooted in theological ethics, the modern Western world emphasizes autonomy and critical thinking. Both approaches, however, aim to develop the individual as a complete person, within a just and cooperative society.

The values of love, solidarity, and moral cultivation, though drawn from Christianity, do not conflict with the values of freedom and autonomy of the Western world. On the contrary, the two approaches complement each other. Ecclesiastical ethics advocate for caring for others and social cohesion, while Western values focus on freedom and collective responsibility. Despite different starting points, both contribute to shaping individuals with critical thinking, empathy, and social awareness. Thus, Don Bosco schools, by combining these dimensions, offer an education that promotes spiritual and moral development in conjunction with modern social challenges.

Don Bosco's philosophy, which focuses on creating a safe and supportive environment, remains highly influential due to its ability to respond effectively to challenges. Today, his schools use technological tools and modern pedagogical methods, such as project-based learning and the integration of creative thinking and critical analysis. These practices enhance the learning process and promote students' personal growth, ensuring they are prepared for the future.

The impact of Don Bosco's philosophy on modern education invites us to reflect on the power of a humanistic approach in youth development. The ability of this philosophy to combine love with effectiveness and support with prevention offers a valuable lesson for the educational community. The enduring recognition and presence of his schools in so many countries demonstrate that success comes not only from adapting to contemporary demands but also from dedication to timeless values that foster human development. This convergence of the past with the present invites us to revolutionize education towards a more empathetic and supportive society.

## REFERENCES

Allen, R. C. (2017). *The Industrial Revolution: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Bosco Catholic School System. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.boscocatholic.org/>

- Braido, P. (n.d.). Don Bosco the educator: Writings and testimonies (1845-1854). LAS. Retrieved from [https://www.sdb.org/en/Don\\_Bosco/Biographical\\_Material/Documents/Don\\_Bosco\\_the\\_Educator\\_writings\\_and\\_testimonies\\_1845\\_1854](https://www.sdb.org/en/Don_Bosco/Biographical_Material/Documents/Don_Bosco_the_Educator_writings_and_testimonies_1845_1854)
- Braido, P. (1999). Junge Menschen ganzheitlich begleiten: Das pädagogische Anliegen Don Boscos. Don-Bosco-Verlag.
- Campus Don Bosco. (n.d.). Don Bosco Schule München. Retrieved from <https://www.campus-donbosco.de>
- Casa Don Bosco. (n.d.). Unser Konzept. Retrieved from <https://casa-donbosco.de/index.php?id=23>
- Ceria, E. (2003). The biographical memoirs of Saint John Bosco (Vol. 19, American ed.). Salesiana Publishers. Retrieved from [https://archive.sdb.org/Documenti/Don\\_Bosco/DB\\_MB/en/BM\\_19\\_en.pdf](https://archive.sdb.org/Documenti/Don_Bosco/DB_MB/en/BM_19_en.pdf)
- Duggan, C. (2007). The force of destiny: A history of Italy since 1796. Penguin Books.
- Endres, N. (1961). Don Bosco – Erzieher und Psychologe. Don Bosco Verlag.
- Hobsbawm, E. (1996). The age of revolution: 1789-1848. Vintage Books. Retrieved from <https://files.libcom.org/files/Eric%20Hobsbawm%20-%20Age%20Of%20Revolution%201789%20-1848.pdf>
- Lenti, A. J. (2010). Don Bosco: History and spirit. LAS - Libreria Ateneo Salesiano. Retrieved from [https://www.salesian.online/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/LentiA\\_v1\\_2010\\_Don\\_Bosco\\_History\\_and\\_Spirit.pdf](https://www.salesian.online/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/LentiA_v1_2010_Don_Bosco_History_and_Spirit.pdf)
- Moran, S. J., & Pipkin, A. (Eds.). (2019). Women and gender in the early modern Low Countries, 1500–1750 (Vol. 217). Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions. Brill. Retrieved from <https://brill.com/downloadpdf/book/edcoll/9789004395647/BP000009.pdf>
- Phelan, E. B. (2021). Don Bosco: A spiritual portrait (Taschenbuch ed.). Hassell Street Press.
- Rapley, E. (1990). The Dévotes: Women and church in seventeenth-century France. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP.
- Stella, P. (1985). Don Bosco: Life and work. Salesiana Publishers.
- The Salesian Preventive System of St. John Bosco (Don Bosco) | Salesian Society (Salesians of Don Bosco) | San Francisco. Retrieved from <https://donboscowest.org>
- Vojtáš, M. (2022). Salesian pedagogy after Don Bosco: From the first generation up to the Synod on young people (1888–2018). Università Pontificia Salesiana. LAS. Retrieved from <https://www.sdb.org/includes/books/181/book.pdf>

Weinschenk, R. (1987). Grundlagen der Pädagogik Don Boscos. Don-Bosco-Verlag