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Loneliness as a Challenge for the Educational System of Fr. John Bosco

Abstract: In this article, the author presents the main assumptions of the preventive pedagogy of Father John Bosco as an effective educational system that can be useful in counteracting loneliness among young people. The article is a theoretical consideration based on a critical analysis of the literature and is preceded by a description of selected threads from the life of John Bosco, which show his commitment to helping young people and understanding their needs. Father Bosco, as an educator and pedagogue, recognised how important it is to build bonds based on trust and love. His approach to education, based on three pillars—reason, religion, and loving kindness—is the foundation on which an environment supporting the young generation can be built. In the face of growing loneliness among young people, his methods can serve as an inspiration for contemporary pedagogues and educators. The article emphasizes that a key element of preventive pedagogy is the presence of adults in the lives of young people. Supporting them in difficult moments, paying attention to their problems, and creating an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding are actions that can significantly reduce the feeling of loneliness. John Bosco, through his experiences, teaches us how important it is for pupils to feel noticed and appreciated. In the context of contemporary challenges, such as mental health crises, the preventive pedagogy of Father Bosco becomes not only a theoretical model but also a practical tool that can help build healthy relationships and support young people in their development.

Keywords: preventive system, loneliness, John Bosco.

Introduction

The education and upbringing of a young person takes many forms and involves numerous individuals and educational institutions. Education and upbringing cannot occur in isolation; it requires the presence of others and meaningful relationships. The fundamental challenge of education and upbringing lies in creating the right conditions for a young person to develop in every aspect of life. To ensure this process is not chaotic, a variety of systems have been developed—structured approaches grounded in practice and experience—to guide those working with youth. One pedagogical system, widely adopted by educators around the world since the mid-19th century, is the preventive system developed by the Italian priest John Bosco. In 1859, he founded the Society of Saint Francis de Sales (Wirth, 2009, p. 113). The core mission of this congregation became the education and care of marginalised youth—those affected by poverty, orphanhood, or lack of access to schooling.

Hundreds of schools as well as educational and pedagogical institutions have been established on the foundation of this preventive system, producing millions of graduates (Niewęglowski, 1997, p. 204). Although John Bosco's pedagogy has been extensively studied, contemporary educators in Salesian schools continue to seek guidance within it—hoping to address the pressing challenges of today's world. Among the most concerning issues affecting modern youth are loneliness and emotional fragility, especially in those facing crises they cannot manage alone.

Loneliness is a topic explored by philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and educators alike. It also features prominently in literature, film, and music. Although most often associated with older adults, loneliness among children and adolescents can mark the beginning of serious personal and social difficulties (Kierzkowska, 2012, pp. 131–133; Wrótniak, 2020, p. 95;). Its manifestations may be emotional, social, or rooted in disrupted values and norms (Wasilewska, 2010, pp. 28–31). Parents and educators are often the first to witness the loneliness of young people. They play a crucial role in preventing it from evolving into alienation, depression, stress, aggression, personality disorders, eating disorders, psychosis, or suicidal thoughts (Wrótniak, 2020, p. 98). Young people who feel lonely and rejected are also at greater risk of school failure, substance abuse, and involvement in criminal activities (Dołęga, 2003, p. 81).

To prevent these outcomes, it is vital to understand the root causes of loneliness. Key contributing factors include: a) Internal causes: difficulties in forming relationships, low self-esteem, helplessness, heightened sensitivity, shyness, passivity, selfishness, lack of clear values or moral guidance, absence of role models, or a desire for solitude; and b) External causes: social change, technological advancement, lifestyle pressures, lack of time for human connection,

illness, disability, age-related issues, social adversity, personal loss (e.g., the death of a loved one), or being placed in an institution far from family and friends (such as a correctional facility or care home), as well as societal stereotypes (Wasilewska-Ostrowska, 2018, p. 66).

To enhance the professional competence of educators, teachers, catechists, psychologists, pedagogues, and parents, Salesian congregations regularly organise training sessions, workshops, and conferences. These initiatives aim to strengthen both practical skills and theoretical knowledge. A notable example was the Salesian Education Forum held on 12 November 2024, under the theme “The fragility of the young person as an educational challenge.” The Forum combined elements of an international academic conference—featuring two speakers from the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome and one from the University of Białystok—with practical workshops led by specialists. Workshop topics included: family attachment styles, low self-esteem, mental health crises, aggression and violence, addiction, gender and sexual identity development, self-harm, and suicidal behaviour¹. This event served as the inspiration for this article, in which I focus on elements of the preventive system that can be adapted today as a means of combating loneliness among the youth.

Loneliness as an Experience of John Bosco

To understand how John Bosco helped young people overcome loneliness, it is important to explore his own life story. His biography reveals numerous moments when he experienced deep isolation—but also shows how he managed to emerge from personal crises.

John Bosco was born on 16 August 1815 in the village of Becchi, in the Piedmont region of Italy. His first significant experience of loneliness came with the death of his father, Francesco, on 11 May 1817. This loss plunged the family into poverty, forcing them to move into a converted shed, where John lived on the edge of destitution with his mother, grandmother, and brothers—Antonio and Giuseppe (Bosco, 2006, pp. 23–31). He also suffered the loss of his grandmother in 1826, and throughout his childhood, he often felt alone among his siblings (Chmielewski, 2000, p. 219). His older brother Antonio, from their father’s first marriage, refused to let John enjoy a carefree childhood. Instead, he demanded labour from him and criticised his interest in education and passion for developing athletic talents. It is worth noting that Antonio himself was perhaps even more isolated. Both brothers had lost their father, and Antonio, having also lost his mother, was raised by a stepmother—Margherita—alongside two half-brothers. Another traumatic episode in John’s early life occurred at the age of 12,

¹ <https://edukacja.bosko.pl/pl/1-forum-wychowania-salezjanskiego> [accessed: 18.11.2024].

when he left home to live with the Moglia family for two years. At that moment, John found himself completely alone—without family, without financial means for education, and without clear prospects of fulfilling his dream of becoming an educator (Auffray, 1977, p. 15). Only at the age of 14 was he able to resume his studies, which he had earlier begun under Fr Joseph Lacqua. He continued first under private tutelage with Fr John Melchior Calosso, then in formal schooling, eventually entering the seminary and ecclesiastical college in Turin. Even as a priest, John Bosco endured misunderstanding, rejection, and lack of support from those who should have stood by him. He was deeply distressed by the injustice he witnessed on the streets of Turin. There were even attempts on his life—yet he never wavered in his commitment to his ideals (Bosco, 2002, p. 202). He founded a new religious congregation at a time when other orders were being dissolved by state law, and when the political climate was dominated by anti-clerical sentiment (Piskurewicz, 2015, p. 178).

I believe that his personal encounters with loneliness enabled John Bosco to profoundly understand marginalised young people—orphans, the poor, prisoners, migrants, unskilled labourers, and the illiterate. These were the individuals he considered his “elite”. For them, he built oratories, schools, vocational workshops, and churches. He sought to offer them what they lacked most: a family home. Everything he did as a priest stemmed from a love for the young and a concern for their future—that they would grow into honest citizens and faithful Christians (Stańkowski, 2019, p. 82). He wanted them to know what is good, and to avoid what is evil. Was he successful? Was his life marked by achievement or disappointment?

As an educator, he achieved remarkable results. By the time of his death on 31 January 1888, there were already 64 Salesian houses operating in six countries. He had gathered around a thousand followers, and his institutions had reached an estimated 300,000 young people. Following his death, the Salesian educational network continued to expand, and in 1934 John Bosco was canonised as a saint of the Catholic Church (Kalisz, 2020, p. 208). From a Christian perspective, his life was undeniably a success—he became a saint. In material terms, even though he lived in great simplicity and constantly struggled to provide for the children in his care and to expand his schools, his sheer determination enabled him to construct grand educational facilities and churches—many of which still inspire awe with their size and ambition.

And what of John Bosco as the architect of the preventive system? I believe that his true strength lay in the authenticity of his life, closely bound to his educational practice. Everything he created was born of a deep conviction that he was doing the right thing, and that sincerity has allowed countless educators to see parts of their own journeys reflected in his. It was only at the urging of his superiors that John Bosco began documenting his work and offering guidance to his successors. Thus was born the preventive system, founded on three pillars: *ragione*, *religione*, *amorevolezza*—reason, religion, and loving

kindness (Niewęłowski, 2011, p. 78). To these three, I always add: the rejection of corporal punishment, the presence of supportive adults (assistance), and the nurturing atmosphere of a family home. Together, these six foundations form the bedrock of every Salesian institution across the world.

Reason

In the preventive educational system, reason encompasses knowledge, learning, and formal education—core principles upon which the Salesian congregation was founded. It is closely tied to rational thinking and prudence: intellectual competence coupled with moral insight. Prudence, as a cardinal virtue, has long been regarded as the “charioteer of the virtues” (Woroniecki 1985, pp. 44, 340; Misiaszek, 1987/1988, p. 47). It is no coincidence, then, that the preventive system places intellectual development, the pursuit of knowledge, and the cultivation of understanding at its very heart. This includes understanding oneself, understanding the young person in one’s care, and understanding the rules and principles that govern life both inside and outside the institution. Thoughtful reflection leads to thoughtful action.

In conversation with pupils, reason manifests as respect, meaningful dialogue, and mutual understanding. Young people deserve thorough explanations in all matters (Szpringer, 2006, p. 50). In particular, when seeking to resolve conflicts between young people, it was essential to investigate the causes carefully and impartially and to attempt reconciliation (Niewęłowski, 2011, p. 80). To prevent misunderstandings, every Salesian institution implemented a code of conduct: clear, practical, and easy to understand—designed to reflect real-life situations and applied equally to all. Importantly, the rules never stifled the atmosphere of spontaneity or trust. If a pupil broke the rules, it was not due to ignorance or an inability to grasp their importance, but rather an expression of bad will (Kalisz, 2008, p. 376).

In the preventive system, reason takes precedence—because both religion and loving kindness must be grounded in it. Religious values, if they are to be accepted and internalised, must be consistently explained; otherwise, they risk being misunderstood, rejected, or distorted into sectarianism. Likewise, loving kindness without reason can easily slide into overprotection, creating dependency and life-long helplessness.

Religion

Religion refers to the concern for both the temporal and eternal aspects of life. As Pope John Paul II wrote in his Apostolic Letter *Iuvenum Patris*, marking the 100th anniversary of St John Bosco’s death: “[...] Don Bosco’s pedagogy is essentially

transcendent, because its ultimate educational aim is the formation of a believer. [...] This aspect of religious transcendence, which lies at the heart of Don Bosco's method, is not only applicable in every culture but can also bear fruit in non-Christian religions" This is what Pope John Paul II wrote about the preventive system in his Apostolic Letter *IUVENUM PATRIS* on the 100th anniversary of the death of St. John Bosco (John Paul II, 2001).

In today's educational climate—shaped by political correctness, secular governance, and sensitivity to minority rights—religion is often marginalised. Yet it is frequently religious norms that most profoundly shape our behaviour, even more than moral, legal, or social codes. A spiritual crisis can also be a source of loneliness. When a person severs ties with religious principles and relinquishes their spiritual life, they are left impoverished in a dimension that gives meaning and connection—deepening their sense of isolation (Charchut, 2013, pp. 17–18). Ewelina Bal argues that loneliness begins to fade when a person embraces their spiritual side—asking fundamental questions about who they are and why they live. At this point, values such as integrity, justice, dignity, prudence, and wisdom take centre stage (Bal, 2013, pp. 749–750). Loneliness, in truth, contradicts the very nature of the human being, who is created for life in community (Bal, 2013, p. 760). In John Bosco's approach, a healthy spiritual life must be woven into the development of the whole person, with personal freedom at its core. Only this way can young people learn to make sound judgements—choosing both human and transcendent values wisely (Łuczyński, 2012, p. 258).

As educators, we need clear norms—but our pupils need them even more. Only when these norms are present and lived out do young people feel truly safe. Importantly, John Bosco never imposed religious practices on his pupils—he offered them, suggested them, made them available. However, this freedom did not extend to the staff, who were expected to live lives of moral integrity (Bosco, 1986, pp. 427–428). In modern schools, when educators no longer serve as positive role models, it is little wonder that discipline and formation suffer. Just as in the family, consistency of values among adults—both at home and in school—is essential for children to feel secure.

Loving Kindness

Kindness—or love—is the distinctive virtue of a parent, teacher, or educator that enables a young person to trust them, to feel safe in their presence, and to form meaningful relationships. A helpful image is that of two loving spouses raising a child. If the spouses show one another mutual love and kindness, their unity and shared values create a nurturing atmosphere where the child feels seen, supported, and secure. Sadly, in today's world, the child often becomes more important than the spouse, leading to overprotection or an unhealthy shift in family dynamics.

John Bosco used to say that to do good, one must possess a certain civil courage—being ready to endure humiliation without humiliating others, and to open one’s heart generously to all (MB III, p. 28). In his preventive system, loving kindness was not sentimentality—it was the means by which trust was built, allowing pupils to open up and form bonds with their educators. Yet forging this kind of relationship required tremendous effort—and not every educator was able to achieve it. In his *Letter from Rome*, John Bosco warned the Salesians against excessive focus on work and study, at the expense of authentic connection. It was not enough for the boys to be loved—they had to know they were loved (Bosco, 1986, p. 435).

This loving kindness had to be shown in practical ways: by spending time with them during recreation, by taking an active interest in their lives. Superiors were encouraged to act as fathers—trusting their pupils, guiding their conduct, and seeking their holistic well-being, both spiritual and material. Education is a matter of the heart. Affection needed to be expressed in ways young people could perceive—so they could grow, side by side with their mentors, toward maturity and independence (Vecchi, 2001, p. 168; Kalisz 2021, p. 37).

If we apply the three components of attitude, as defined by Marody (1976, p. 6), to the concept of loving kindness, then *amorevolezza* can be understood as a concern for the intellectual understanding of the young person, for their emotional world (which implies pedagogical empathy—sharing in their inner states), and as a caring, loving commitment. When an educator knows the pupil, understands them, empathises with their emotions, expresses their own feelings, and devotes themselves to the pupil’s well-being—then they are acting justly. That is, they are giving the young person what is rightfully theirs.

No Corporal Punishment

Another tenet of the preventive system is the complete rejection of corporal punishment. To ensure that every young person felt safe, the Salesians strictly forbade not only physical punishment, but also any form of degrading or humiliating language. This approach reflected deep respect for the dignity of the pupil and broke away from repressive educational systems where punishment often led to mistrust, aggression, and fear of authority. Punishments delivered during childhood—especially by those in a position of care—were rarely forgotten. They left emotional wounds, and sometimes even a desire for revenge. In the preventive system, the educator was to be a benefactor: someone who protected the pupil from harm, shame, and punishment (Bosco, 1986, p. 426). Yet the absence of corporal punishment did not mean a lack of rules or consequences. In particularly serious cases of misconduct, the most severe consequence was transfer or expulsion—used as a last resort to prevent the moral decay of the wider student community (Bosco, 2001, p. 243). Even then, such actions were never

violent—physically or emotionally—and were deeply painful for the educators themselves, who used them reluctantly.

How, then, did John Bosco punish? In the same way a woman might: a mother, a sister, a wife. With feeling. Sometimes, the simple absence of warmth—a withheld smile, a pause in kindness—is enough to convey disapproval. That was John Bosco's method. However, his successors often found it difficult to emulate. Why? Because such a form of discipline depends entirely on the existence of a close relationship. Without that bond, this subtle form of correction may fail to have any effect. In such cases, John Bosco encouraged educators to follow the guidelines he laid out in his 1883 letter on the use of punishment in Salesian houses. These include: never punish until every other option has been exhausted; choose the right moment to issue a warning; eliminate any trace of anger in one's actions; and always leave the young person with hope for forgiveness. Bosco also outlined the types of appropriate punishments and the individuals authorised to administer them (Bosco, 2001, pp. 231–244).

In place of physical force, Salesian institutions relied on moral authority—a strength made possible through the religious character of their education (Weinschenk, 2000, p. 130). A conscience formed through spiritual development would lead young people to avoid wrongdoing on their own initiative. The weight of guilt, the awareness of sin, the discomfort of moral dissonance—these were more effective than physical punishment ever could be. Patient correction, repeated in a spirit of kindness, and the distinctively Salesian style of teaching, gradually shaped pupils from within. In time, many not only refrained from wrongdoing themselves but began to encourage their peers to do the same (Kalisz, 2011, p. 215). This self-discipline—the preventive strength of “watching over oneself”—was closely tied to the internalisation of values passed on by educators. In well-functioning institutions, it was often enough to cultivate a small group of student leaders who, working alongside the educators, helped foster a shared commitment to living by common principles.

Assistance

One of the defining qualities of an educator is assistance—the consistent, active presence of the educator in the life of the young person. This principle is inseparable from the loving kindness, for only a kind-hearted educator can truly embody the role of an assistant. Don Bosco referred to this presence as “obligatory and continuous assistance”—a form of pedagogical presence that serves two essential functions: offering guidance and modelling good behaviour, in accordance with the saying goes: “Words move, but examples draw.” (Pomianowski, 1998, p. 148). In the preventive system, the assistant is not a distant authority figure, but a close companion—someone who accompanies the young person through learning, recreation, and rest. Their mission is to communicate values and, just as

importantly, to ensure that free time does not become idle time, often leading to trouble or loneliness. John Bosco advised educators to organise activities in such a way that young people were never left alone or without purpose. Educational assistance came to life through structured leisure activities—especially sport, music, and theatre (Bosco, 1986, p. 427).

The relationships that formed between educators and pupils in these settings were grounded in openness, trust, and availability. Assistance was meant to continue until the young person reached maturity and responsibility—only then, said Bosco, could real freedom be entrusted to them (Kłak, 2009, p. 120). This kind of presence can be likened to that of parents guiding their children until they become self-reliant. An assistant does not isolate the young person but creates opportunities for healthy interaction with the wider world. Educational efforts were never limited to the boundaries of the Salesian institution; they extended to schools, cultural settings, and peer groups (Zegzuła, 1999, pp. 275–276). This was crucial in preparing young people for adult life, where the rules and rhythms differ from those of a well-structured educational environment (Kalisz, 2010, p. 485).

The Atmosphere of a Family Home

The final cornerstone of preventive pedagogy is the atmosphere of a family home. Only in such an environment can young people grow and truly flourish.

In the Salesian tradition, every act of education was an expression of care for someone deeply valued—someone worth knowing, respecting. The dedication of the educators resembled the loving concern of parents for their children.

Don Bosco insisted that within his communities, everyone should feel at home (Constitutions, 1986, p. 37). This family spirit was evident even in the terminology used for institutions, which were referred to as homes or educational works (Gabrel, 1974, p. 140). And in these homes, the role of “parent” was shared not just by assistants or directors, but by every adult who came into contact with the young. Family spirit also meant the presence of both men and women on staff, enabling young people to learn mutual respect and appropriate relationships between adults. A well-formed family atmosphere had a therapeutic effect—especially for children and adolescents with behavioural challenges. In such cases, the aim was to make up for socialisation deficits and correct past errors in their socialization process (Weischen, 2000, p. 110).

Conclusions

When analyzing the preventive system, it is helpful to consider its connection to ethical principles. In ethics, reason and will are seen as the primary forces

shaping our thoughts and actions. Yet too often, reason loses its battle with the will—we find ourselves doing the very harm we wish to avoid, and failing to do the good we truly intend (Pilikowski, 2010, p. 33). For this reason, John Bosco did not place his trust in reason alone. He also emphasised the will to do good—what educational ethics describes as character formation and the cultivation of the moral virtues: prudence, justice, courage, and temperance (Woroniecki, 1985, pp. 373–386).

Today, just as in John Bosco's time, we must ask difficult questions about the moral independence of the modern educator: Is the educator lost? Does he/she hold personal convictions—values and beliefs he/she is not ashamed to express? Can he/she articulate them clearly, and more importantly, live them out? Professional ethics can offer guidance in moments of moral conflict. When educators are faced with dilemmas in their work, they can turn to established ethical frameworks for direction. In Salesian schools, this framework is rooted in the preventive system and Catholic theology.

The preventive system is a proven model for working with youth, and if all its components are applied, it will be effective. It is not a matter of mere coincidence, luck, or success by chance, or of a theory with no practical application. But for it to work, all of its pillars must be upheld. If even one is missing, the others cannot compensate. For instance, if an educator were to resort to violence or cause scandal, it would mean they had ceased to love, forgotten what it means to respect the young, and lost mastery over their own will. That is why educators are called not only to know the system, but to live it—to lead by example and to maintain a clear, principled commitment to doing good.

Directors, superiors, in turn, bear the responsibility of supporting staff who are noble, wise, kind, morally upright, and spiritually grounded—rather than those whose lifestyles stand in contradiction to the values of honest citizenship and faithful Christian living, and who disregard the ethical culture of the Salesian environment.

In summary, the preventive system is a pedagogy of integrity. It offers an ideal to aim for, a vision to rediscover, and a practice to implement—so that together, educators and pupils can strive toward the fullness of what it means to be human. It also functions as a moral compass for contemporary teachers, helping to clarify and organise their value systems. And crucially, it provides a powerful response to many of today's pressing educational challenges—including the growing loneliness experienced by young people.

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