

II. PREVENTION AND EDUCATION (1877-1878)

The Preventive System in the education of the young (1877)²³ is one of the most important and widespread documents by the founder of the Salesians and the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians. It is the first more or less complete account—despite its small size—that Don Bosco had put together on his educational approach. It is with this “small treatise” that his reputation as educator and pedagogue became so intimately linked.

With regard to the origin of the document, there are some pointers to be found in the unpublished diary of one of Don Bosco’s most attentive collaborators: Giulio Barberis²⁴. On March 12, 1877, the opening of the new site of the Patronage de Saint-Pierre took place in Nice. Don Bosco gave a speech or ‘exposé’ which he then completed shortly after returning to Italy. After describing the celebration and after the text of his speech he followed up with a “summary” of what had to do with the “education system we use, which we call preventive.” The work cost Don Bosco “several days. He redid it three times and was complaining that he just could not find the right way to put things as he wanted.”²⁵

In autumn 1877, the Salesian press at San Pier d’Arena printed a booklet containing all the material and details of the event in Nice, “with an appendix on the Preventive System in the education of the young.” From then on translations, reprintings and new editions multiplied. An ‘occasional’ work, then, became a pedagogical text of general interest in the light of the facts.

²³ The first version of this item was published in a bilingual edition, Italian and French, in a pamphlet called: *The opening of the Patronage de S. Pierre in Nice. Purpose of this work, explained by Father John Bosco with an appendix on the preventive system in the education of youth.* Torino, tip. e libr. salesiana 1877; cf. Giovanni BOSCO (s.), *Il Sistema Preventivo nella educazione della gioventù.* Introduction and critical texts by P. Braido. Roma, LAS 1985.

²⁴ Cf. M. FISSORE, *Il Vademecum di don Giulio Barberis ...*, p. 11; Eugenio CERIA, *Profili di capitolarli salesiani morti dall’anno 1865 al 1959 ...* Colle Don Bosco (Asti), Libreria Dottrina Cristiana 1951, pp. 305-324.

²⁵ *Cronachetta*, 12, p. XI; cf. *DBE, Scritti*, pp. 209-210.

*No traces of the handwritten original dossier on The Preventive System in the education of the young have been found as yet. “But there is no doubting Don Bosco’s authorship of this item. Other than Fr Barberis’ clear testimony, a careful lexical, syntactic and stylistic study of the text is more than sufficient when compared with similar writings by Don Bosco.”*²⁶

But he did not intend to draw up a systematic pedagogical treatise nor an original excursus on education. He considered the work as “a sketch” of something he was thinking of publishing. He then adds that “two systems have been used throughout time in educating the young: Preventive and Repressive”, and he states without any hesitation that he follows the former, the “Preventive system” which “is usually used” in Salesian houses, and—he emphasises—“which is based completely on reason, religion and loving kindness.”

The work which Don Bosco thought of completing remained simply as a planned one but the little booklet on pedagogy in 1877 is more than a simple “sketch”. Reflected in it are ideas and guidelines from the pedagogical culture of the time, assimilated and re-presented in a characteristic and original way, and located within authentic Christian and Catholic tradition.

*“Alongside the value of the Preventive System as a formulation of pedagogical teachings we also need to recall its value in the history of educational praxis. The Preventive System incorporated into the Regulations of the Salesian Society became the basic document for pedagogical formation, was commented on and developed while Don Bosco was still alive by Fr Barberis in his notes on “sacred pedagogy”, and by Fr Francis Cerruti in brief essays and talks, and by Fr Dominic Giordano in various pedagogical writings.”*²⁷

After careful research, Pietro Braidò came to this conclusion regarding the “short history” of the Preventive System: “Its first explicit literary formulation is due to Don Bosco, who put it into practice and gave it a sufficiently recognisable

²⁶ DBE, *Scritti*, p. 210.

²⁷ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica...*, II, p. 462. The Salesian scholar then mentions certain “limitations” in the work.

*shape amongst all the other models of pedagogy. We are not dealing with a perfectly complete and closed system but something open to additions and developments, theoretical and historical, which enrich it without distorting its essential original features.”*²⁸

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*In 1878, Don Bosco sent the Minister for Internal Affairs, Francesco Crispi²⁹, an item that borrowed the title already used—The Preventive System in the education of the young. Emphasising certain features of the content, this was also published with the title: The Preventive System as applied to young people at risk (1878).”*³⁰

The second document sent to Crispi was accompanied by a letter in which Don Bosco noted a number of buildings in Rome which he thought appropriate for founding a hospice or hostel where he could apply the Preventive System with young people at risk.

Different paragraphs of the two “versions of the preventive system” coincide almost literally but there are also differences between the two, both in their general arrangement and their contents. In the 1877 booklet his pedagogical concern stands out; the shorter memo in 1878 instead has a certain socio-political character, pointing to the phenomenon of social changes which were making the problem of “abandoned youth” more acute and threatening.

²⁸ P. BRAIDO, *Breve storia del “sistema preventivo”...*, p. 5. One of Don Bosco’s first collaborators and scholars wrote in 1910: “I am certain that you all know the few but pithy pages by our good Father about this system, understood and taught by great pedagogues, which he made his own, threw wonderful soft light upon, so it shone out through his words and example. He embellished it with all the grace that comes from the Gospel.” (Francesco CERRUTI, *Educazione ed istruzione. Sistema preventivo. Ispezioni scolastiche e civili*. Torino, Tip. S.A.I.D. “Buona Stampa” 1910, pp. 7-8).

²⁹ Francesco Crispi (1818-1901), member of the historical Left in Italy; president of the council of ministers [Prime Minister] for the Kingdom of Italy (1887-1891 and 1893-1896).

³⁰ Cf. DBE, *Scritti*, p. 284.

One of the many ministerial crises interrupted the procedures that had begun. Don Bosco presented his “project” to the new Minister for the Interior, Giuseppe Zanardelli³¹ but according to accessible documentation, without positive result. Also of interest is the intention of the founder of the Salesian Congregation to present his educational approach for secular settings involving poor and at risk youngsters.

151. The Preventive System in the Education of the Young

Critical ed. in DBE, Scritti, pp. 248-257 (OE XXVIII, 422-443).

On a number of occasions I been have asked to express, verbally or in writing, a few thoughts concerning the so-called Preventive System which we are accustomed to use in our houses. Until now I have not been able to comply with this wish for lack of time, but I am giving an outline of it here which will serve as a sketch of a small work which I am preparing, if God gives me life enough to be able to complete it. I do this solely to help in the difficult art of the education of the young. Therefore I will say what the Preventive System consists of and why it should be preferred; its practical application, and its advantages.

1. What the Preventive System consists of and why it should be preferred

There have been two systems used through the ages in the education of the young: preventive and repressive. The repressive approach consists in making the law known to the students and then supervising them in order to detect transgressions, inflicting, wherever necessary, the merited punishment. Using this system the words and the appearance of the Superior must always be severe and somewhat menacing and he must avoid all friendly relationships with his dependants.

To give greater weight to his authority, the Director would need to be seen but rarely among his subjects, and generally speaking only when it was a question of punishing or threatening. This system is easy, less demanding

³¹ Giuseppe Zanardelli (1826-1903), lawyer and politician, Prime Minister from 1901 to 1903, and affiliated with the Propaganda Masonic Lodge. He was Minister for the Interior for some months in 1878.

and is especially useful in the army and among adult and sensible people who ought themselves know and remember what is to be done according to the law and other regulations.

Quite otherwise, I would say its very opposite, is the preventive system. It consists in making known the rules and regulations of an Institute, and then supervising in such a way that the students are always under the vigilant eye of the Director and the Assistants, who like loving fathers will converse with them, act as guides in every event, counsel them and lovingly correct them, which is as much as to say, will put the students into a situation where they cannot do wrong.

This system is all based on reason, religion and loving kindness. Because of this it excludes every violent punishment, and tries to do without even mild punishments. It seems that this system is preferable for the following reasons:

1. Being forewarned, the pupil is not disheartened when he does something wrong, as happens when such things are reported to the one in charge. Nor does he get angry from being corrected, or threatened with punishment, or even from actually being punished, because there has always been through the affair a friendly voice forewarning him which reasons with him and generally manages to win his friendship, so that the pupil knows there must be a punishment and almost wants it.

2. The basic reason (why young people get into trouble) is youthful fickleness which can forget the rules of discipline and the punishments they threaten in a flash. For this reason a child often commits a fault and deserves punishment, to which he had not given a thought, which he did not remember at all in the act of committing the fault, and which he certainly would have avoided had a friendly voice warned him.

3. The Repressive system can stop a disorder but only with difficulty can it improve offenders. One observes that young people do not forget the punishments they have suffered, and generally remain embittered, wanting to throw off the yoke and even to take revenge. It seems at times they pay no heed, but anyone who follows them up in later life knows that the recollections of the young are dreadful, and that they forget the punishments inflicted by their

parents, but with great difficulty those given by their teachers. Episodes are known of some who in their old age have exacted an ugly revenge for certain punishments justly inflicted during their school days. On the other hand the Preventive system makes a friend of the student, who sees a benefactor in the assistant who gives him good advice, wants to make him good, shield him from unpleasantness, punishment and dishonour.

4. The Preventive System offers the student previous warning, in a way that the educator can still speak to him in the language of the heart, whether during the time of his education, or later. The educator, having won the loving respect of his protégé, will be able to greatly influence him, warn him, counsel him, and also correct him, even when he is employed, whether it be in the civil service, or in commerce. For these and many other reasons it seems that the Preventive System should prevail over the repressive.

2. Application of the Preventive System

The practice of this system is all based on the words of St Paul, who says: *“Charitas benigna est, patiens est; omnia suffert, omnia sperat, omnia sustinet.* Love is kind, and patient; it puts up with all things, but hopes all things and endures any disturbance.” For this reason only a Christian can successfully apply the Preventive system. Reason and Religion are the means the educator should constantly make use of, teaching them, making use of them himself if he wishes to be obeyed and to attain his goal.

1. For this reason the Director should be dedicated to his pupils. He should never assume tasks that would take him away from his duties; on the contrary, he should be among his pupils every time they are not taken up with other legitimate tasks, unless they are duly assisted by others.

2. The teachers, the technical instructors, the assistants should all be of known moral rectitude. The wrongdoing of just one person can compromise an educational Institute. They should act in such a way that the students are never alone. As far as possible the assistants should precede them to the place where they are required to assemble; they should remain with them until others come to assist them; they should never allow them to be idle.

3. Give them ample liberty to jump, run, make a din as much as they please. Gymnastics, music, recitals (of poems, etc.), theatricals, hikes, are very effective methods for getting discipline; they encourage good living and good health. Just ensure that the plot, the characters and the dialogue are not unsuitable. That great friend of youth, St Phillip Neri used to say, “Do whatever you wish; for me it is enough you do not sin.”

4. Frequent Confession, frequent Communion, daily Mass are the pillars that ought to support an educational edifice, from which one would want to keep at bay threats and violence. Never require the youngsters to go to the Holy Sacraments, but just encourage them, and offer them every opportunity to make good use of them. Then on the occasion of retreats, novenas, homilies, religious instructions, one should highlight the beauty, the greatness, the holiness of that Religion which proposes with such easy methods things as useful to civil society, to peace of heart, to the salvation of one’s soul, as are these holy sacraments. In this way the young people will become involved spontaneously in these religious practices, with pleasure and with fruit (1).

5. Exercise the strictest vigilance to prevent friends, books or persons who carry on bad conversations being allowed in the Institute. The appointment of a good doorkeeper constitutes a treasure for a house of education.

6. Every evening after the usual prayers, and before the students go to bed, the Director, or someone in his place should offer a few kind words in public, giving some good advice or counsel regarding things to be done or avoided, and let him try to glean these from events that have taken place that day in the Institute or outside. But his talk should never go on more than two or three minutes. This is the key to good behaviour, progress and educational success.

7. Avoid like the plague the opinion of any one who would want to postpone First Holy Communion to too old an age, when most times the devil has taken possession of the heart of a youngster with incalculable harm to his innocence. According to the discipline of the early Church it was customary to give to infants the consecrated Hosts left over from the Easter Communion. This helps us realise how much the Church loves to see children admitted to their First Communion in due time. Once a child can tell the

difference between Bread and bread, and shows himself to be sufficiently instructed, pay no attention to his age and let the Heavenly King come to reign in that happy soul.

8. Catechisms recommend frequent Communion. St Phillip Neri advised receiving once a week, or even more frequently. The Council of Trent states clearly that it greatly wishes every faithful Christian to also receive Communion each time he goes to Mass. But this communion should not only be spiritual but in fact sacramental, so that one may gain greater benefit from this august and divine sacrifice. (Council of Trent, session XXII, chap. VI).

3. Usefulness of the Preventive System

Someone might say that this system is difficult in practice. I reply that from the point of view of the students it turns out easier, more satisfying, more advantageous. In the case of the educator, it does include some difficult features, which however are diminished if the educator addresses the task with devotion. An educator is one devoted to the well-being of his students, and for this reason ought to be ready to face every inconvenience, every fatigue in order to achieve his goal, which is the civil, moral and intellectual education of his students.

Over and above the advantages set out above, I would also add:

1. The student will have the greatest respect for the educator and will go on recalling with pleasure the orientation he was given, always considering his teachers and the other Superiors as fathers and brothers. Wherever they go, these students are generally the consolation of their families, useful citizens and good Christians.

2. Whatever might be the character, the attitude, the moral state of a pupil at the time he is enrolled, his parents can be secure in the knowledge that their son will not deteriorate, and one may confidently assert that one will achieve some improvement. Indeed, certain youngsters who for a long time were the scourge of their parents, and were even refused entry into houses of correction, when cared-for according to these principles, changed their

attitude, their character, they set themselves to live a decent life, and now fill honourable places in society, thus becoming the support of their families, and a credit to the area they live in.

3. Pupils having unfortunate habits who perchance should gain entry into an Institute will not be able to harm their fellows, nor will good boys be harmed by them, because there will be neither time, place, or opportunity, insofar as the assistant, whom we presume to be present, would rapidly put things right.

*A word on punishments*³²

What criteria should one observe when inflicting punishment? Where possible, one should not make use of punishments, but when necessity demands repression, one should bear in mind the following:

1. The educator at work amongst his pupils should make himself loved, if he wishes to be respected. In this case the omission of an act of goodwill is a punishment, but a punishment that acts as a challenge, encourages, and never disheartens.

2. With the young, what is used as a punishment becomes a punishment. One can observe that a less-than-loving look is for some worse than being struck. Praise when something is done well, blame when there is negligence, are already reward and punishment.

3. Except in very rare cases, corrections, punishments should never be given in public, but privately, apart from companions, and one should use the greatest prudence and patience to have the student understand his fault through reason and religion.

³² Not included in the collection is the so-called circular *On punishments to be inflicted in Salesian houses* (ASC A1750401), ms by Fr John B. Francesca dated 1883 and published for the first time in 1935 (cf. MB XVI, 440-449) by Fr Eugene Ceria. In this item wrongly attributed to Don Bosco and written down by Fr Rua, we find the oft-repeated phrase: "education is a thing of the heart". Cf. José Manuel PRELLEZO, "*Dei castighi*" (1883): *puntualizzazioni sull'autore e sulle fonti redazionali dello scritto*, in RSS 27 (2008) 287-307.

4. The Rector should make the rules well known, along with the rewards and punishments set down in the disciplinary policy, so that no pupil might be able to excuse himself by saying he did not know what was commanded or forbidden.

If this system is put into practice in our Houses I believe that we will be able to achieve excellent results without resorting either to corporal punishment, nor to other violent punishments. For these forty years during which I have dealt with the young, I do not remember ever having used any kind of punishment, and with the help of God I have always got not only what was necessary, but even had my wishes met, and that from those same young people for whom every hope of a good outcome seemed in vain (1).

(1) Not long ago a minister of the Queen of England, visiting an Institute in Turin was taken to a large hall where about 500 boys were studying. He was not a little amazed at seeing so many children in perfect silence, with no supervision. His amazement grew even more when he came to know that perhaps in an entire year, one did not have to complain of a word being said out of place, or so much as threaten a punishment, much less inflict one. "Tell me, how ever is it possible to obtain such silence and such discipline?" he asked. And he added to his secretary, "Write down whatever he says." "Sir," replied the Director of the establishment "the means we use is not available to you." "Why?" "Because they are secrets known only to Catholics." "What are they?" "Frequent Confession and Communion, and Daily Mass well heard." "You are absolutely right. We lack these powerful means of education." "Can't you do this in other ways?" "If you do not make use of these religious means, you must turn to threats and the stick." "You are right! You are right! Religion or the rod, I want to recount this in London!"

152. The Preventive System in the Education of the Young ["At Risk"]

Critical ed. in *DBE, Scritti*, pp. 291-294 ("Original by Don Bosco of a note for Minister Francesco Crispi").

There are two systems used in the moral and civic education of youth: repressive and preventive. One or the other can be applied in society generally, and in houses of education. We will give a brief general outline of the preventive system as it applies in society generally, then how it can be used in places of detention, in colleges, in hostels, and in boarding schools.

The Preventive and Repressive Systems In Society at Large

The repressive system consists in making known the laws and the penalties they establish. Then the authorities must be vigilant to discover and punish offenders. This is the system used in the army and in general among adults. But young people who are uninstructed, non-reflective, urged on by companions or recklessness, often blindly permit themselves to be dragged into wrongdoing for the sole reason that they are left to themselves.

Whilst the law should look out for offenders, a great deal of effort should also be put into diminishing their numbers.

Which Young People Can be Said To be At Risk?

I believe that one can identify the following [categories] not as bad, but as being at risk of becoming so:

1. Those who go from cities or other regions in the State to other cities and regions in search of work. Generally, they have little money with them, and in a short time, it is spent. If they don't find work soon, they run into the real danger of getting involved in theft, and of beginning a way of life that will lead them to ruin.

2. Those who have lost their parents and have no one to care for them and so are left to become vagabonds and associate with criminal elements, while a friendly hand, a loving voice would have been able to guide them on the path of honourable living and upright citizenship.

3. Those who have parents who cannot or will not look after their children and throw them out of the house or abandon them completely. Unfortunately, there are many such unnatural parents.

4. Vagabonds who fall into the hands of the police, but who are not yet Law-breakers. If these were admitted to a hostel where they could be taught, prepared for work, they would certainly be snatched away from the prisons and restored to society.

What Should be Done?

Experience has taught us that we can provide effectively for these four categories of children:

1. With recreation centres opening on Sundays and holidays. With pleasant recreation, music, physical education, (the opportunity) to run, jump, recite, put on plays, they would readily come together. Add to that evening classes, Sunday school with religious instruction, and one gives adequate and essential moral nourishment to these poor sons of the people.

2. When they are brought together this way we must enquire and discover who is unemployed, then take steps to find them work and oversee their work during the week.

3. Beyond that, we come into contact with those who are poor and abandoned, and lack the wherewithal to feed and clothe themselves, or find a place to sleep at night. There is only one way of providing for them: with hostels and safe places which have arts and crafts, and also by means of agricultural schools.

Government Intervention

The Government could cooperate in the following ways without taking on the minutiae of administration, or interfering with the principle of legitimate (public) charity:

1. Provide centres for activities on weekends, help equip the schools and the centres with the necessary equipment.

2. Provide locales for hostels, equip them with the necessary tools for the arts and trades which the young people admitted to them could be assigned to.

3. The Government would allow freedom in the enrolment of students, but would pay a daily or monthly subsidy for those admitted if they have found themselves in the conditions described above. Their condition would be verified either through government certification or through the normal

activity of the Police Department, which very frequently comes across children who are precisely in this condition.

4. This daily subsidy would be limited to one-third of what it would cost to maintain a youth in a state reformatory. Taking the correctional prisons of the *Generalata* in Turin as a norm, and reducing the total expense for each individual (by two-thirds), one could calculate this at 80 cents a day.

In this way the Government would help, but leave citizens free to play their part with private charity.

Results

On the basis of thirty-five years' experience, it is possible to establish that:

1. Many boys coming out of the prisons can readily be guided to a trade with which to earn an honest crust.

2. Many who were at risk of being out of control, had begun to be public pests and were already causing a deal of trouble to the public authorities, were plucked out of danger and were put on the road to becoming upright citizens.

3. One can see from our records that no fewer than 100,000 youths have been cared for, taken in, educated with this system, some learning music, others liberal arts, some an art or craft and have become good-living workmen, shop assistants, owners of shops, teachers, hard-working clerks, and many have gained an honourable rank in the army. Many, endowed by nature with a good intelligence, were able to take up university courses, graduating in Literature, Mathematics, Medicine, Law or becoming engineers, notaries, pharmacists and suchlike.