

# **DON BOSCO'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION**

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## **Introduction**

I wish to ground this paper in the context of the theme of the seminar: “The Heart of Educating India – Don Bosco System of Education in Dialogue with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Educators.” The 21<sup>st</sup> century is saturated by post-modernism, post-truth, relativism, individualism, consumerism, etc. In this existential situation, we are conditioned by narrow horizons, short lived careers and fleeting values. The need of the hour is to engage in an educational system that will address these challenges. This paper attempts to look at the relevance of Don Bosco’s system of education for our modern times.

My attempt here is not to prove that Don Bosco’s method of education is in fact a philosophical system, but rather delineate its relevance and significance today. For Plato principles are the root source of knowledge and being. For Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, the principles are the fundamentals that govern our knowledge, the way of being and acting. These principles define the *modus operandi*, a way of proceeding. They enable us to orient ourselves in thought and action, leading us to get a clearer understanding of the purpose of life. It is in this sense that we can talk of Don Bosco’s philosophy of education.

Don Bosco sees education as a process of transformational activity of the individual. It consists in sharing of faith, human experiences, transmission of knowledge and values, fostering critical thinking and reflection, all done in a loving environment.

## **Principles of Don Bosco’s Philosophy of Education**

Don Bosco is an educator saint of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who revolutionized the system of education. His system of education evolved from his vocation rather than his profession. He was the first Saint in Italian history to whom the State paid homage by a speech in Campidoglio by the Minister of Education the day after his canonization. His contribution to education was immense. It aimed at the transformation of the individual.

Don Bosco did not write much on education. The little that he wrote was qualitatively dense. The only specifically written treatise is about six pages entitled: *The Preventive System in the Education of the Young*. There are other writings, which record his experiences such as, *The Regulations of the Festive Oratory; The Letter from Rome of 1884; The Letter on the use of punishments in Salesian houses and the Memoirs of the Oratory*, from which we can cull out his insights and principles of education. What he practiced and wrote was born from his personal experiences of having accompanied scores of young people. He was an educator first and then an educationist, a father

first and then a philosopher.

In 1883 a correspondent for a French newspaper ‘*Pèlerin*’ referring to Don Bosco’s educational method wrote in one of his articles: “*We have not seen this system in action before. In Turin the students form a huge college, in which queues do not exist, but the students move from one place to another as in a family. Each group surrounds their teacher, without being noisy, patiently, without contrasts. We have admired the serene faces of those boys and we could not keep from exclaiming: God's finger is here*”.

Reaffirming the validity of Don Bosco’s system of education, Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, in 1920, a famous anticlerical and faithless but honest pedagogist, wrote to his fellow men: “*Don Bosco was a great man whom you should try to learn about. In the Church ambit, he succeeded in creating an important educational movement, giving back to the Church that contact with the masses which it had lost. For us, who are not part of the Church and also of all Churches, he is a hero, a hero of preventive education and of the school-family relations.*”

Don Bosco’s system of education emerged out of his concrete experience with his boys. It was a practice that gave rise to a system. He revolutionized the process and purpose of education. It is popularly known as the preventive system. Its Latin root, ‘*Prae-venire*’ means “to come beforehand” or to ‘anticipate’ the future problems and challenges and guide the students. Vigilance through constant presence cuts wrongdoing sufficiently to eliminate punishments. Positively it consists in kindly supervision with the aim of building character and guarding against harmful influences. The three pillars that guide this process are reason, faith and love. This whole process is guided by the educator who is ever present.

## **Reason**

A human being is composed of both body and soul. For Don Bosco both are essential components of being human. Reason focuses on a progressive enlightenment of the minds of the young, opening them to the world and to the realities of life. Helping the child to reason is like teaching someone to fish rather than giving a fish.

One of the challenges of modern education is that students are given a plethora of information on a wide range of subjects. It is seldom that they are taught to think, reason out and express their thoughts. As a result they find it difficult to use and apply information received in new contexts and find their way about in a complex world. This first principle of the educational system of Don Bosco enables the students to master the art of thinking and move towards broader horizons.

Don Bosco affirms that through reason, “it is possible to arrive at a point where the child recognizes the need of punishment; nay more, he desires it; seeing here not a rigid meting out of retribution, but a kindness on the part of the educator, who offers him the chance to raise himself up, and to re-establish himself in his own eyes and in those of others.” External force or punishment has never a formative value. Reason helps the student to understand the process of true education and the development of right conscience. Reasonableness leads one beyond formalism thus paving the way for a more participatory and happy learning process.

## **Faith**

One of the challenges of modern society is that there is a degeneration of values and the prevalence of practical atheism due to an overdose of materialism and relativism. It is faith and the element of the divine that gives life its real purpose and meaning. His pedagogical approach emerges from the ‘metaphysical’ – from a relationship with God and towards a relationship with God.

Don Bosco insists that we are fundamentally spiritual beings. The light of the Gospels illumine a person to see life as one unitary whole with a purpose destined by God. The faith element gives one the right perspective on learning and life. It helps one to lead a responsible and a value-based life with profound respect for oneself, the other, nature and God. Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan a renowned educationist and philosopher speaks of education as a spiritual enterprise. He believed that an education that cannot develop spiritual feelings in the students is not real. For Don Bosco, education is a spiritual activity leading one to salvation.

## **Love**

The repressive system of education that believes in strict discipline through punishments, with the old understanding of taming the beast in a person does not help in the growth of the person. If we educate the young person using force or coercive methods, the young mind will have aversion towards the content and the process of learning. Once one hates a subject, learning stops. Long before the modern developmental psychological theories, Don Bosco recognized and proposed that Education is a matter of the heart. It is love in action. Love is the key that gives access to the heart of every young person. Only in a loving environment does a child learn best.

Hence for Don Bosco, education is based on the relationship between the teacher and the pupil. He abolished all forms of ‘imposition’. His system of education is guided by love which is not unidirectional but reciprocal. Don Bosco would say that it is not enough that you love, but the boys should know that they are loved. Don Bosco recalled the words of St. Francis de Sales: “You can catch more flies with a teaspoon of honey than with a barrel of vinegar.” Don Bosco’s educational system was developed as a product of his own tremendous love for the youth.

Don Bosco would say, “If we sometimes see our work as fruitless and all our efforts reaping nothing but thorns and thistles, believe me, my dear friends, the blame must fall upon a defective system of discipline devoid of love.”(BM XVI, 372) He encouraged the educators to be close to the young and win them over. Once they are won over, they can have great influence over them.

## **Presence**

Confronted with the availability and access to information one might begin to question the need of teachers/educators today. An educator’s role is not merely to transmit information, but to transform a person. This transformation takes place only through the presence and the accompaniment of the educator. Don Bosco was fully

convinced of the need for the physical presence of the educator inside and outside the classroom. Being present has a transforming effect on the children. The educator becomes a role model, a friend, a guide, a brother and a father who cares about the growth of the individual. Don Bosco says, “a teacher who is only seen in the teacher’s chair, is just a teacher and nothing more. If he goes into recreation with the boys he becomes their brother.” The physical presence of the educator establishes a rapport that promotes emotional, intellectual, moral and spiritual formation of the students.

### **3. Relevance of Don Bosco’s Philosophy of Education**

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At this juncture, we need to ask a query. Will these educational principles of Don Bosco address the challenging scenario of education of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Israel Scheffler describes the contemporary situation thus: “We have been living through a period that has seen a remarkable burst of technological energy which has already transformed – and will continue to transform – a wide variety of human activities, including education, in ways that can hardly be foreseen. [...] And while the sciences and the global technical culture they have made possible base themselves on an appeal to stringent empirical tests, open theoretical debate, and objective criteria of evidence, large segments of our public have increasingly rejected the very notions of objective inquiry and the pursuit of truth, replacing them with the idea that subjectivism rules and (almost) anything goes. Clearly, there is work for philosophy to do in responding to our new intellectual and cultural situation.”

We live in an information age where knowledge is changing drastically and where paradigms are shifting rapidly. Educating an individual today is a Martian task. At times we are clueless as to how to educate our younger generations. Richard Riley the former US Secretary of Education, captures these sentiments when he says: *We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist, to use technologies that haven't been invented, in order to solve problems, we don't even know are problems yet.*

Against this backdrop, the traditional notion of education as preparation for a career or a successful future (success measured in terms of material prosperity) cannot stand anymore. In a situation where education is in a sort of crisis, Don Bosco’s system is a time-tested answer. Education is for LIFE. For Don Bosco the end of all education is not preparation for a particular career but the holistic growth and development of the human person.

In today’s world, the knowledge generation has switched gears and is changing at an astronomical speed. A few decades ago, an average knowledge generation was between 30 to 40 years. Today it is down to two years or even less according to some scientists. Every two years, new paradigms, new technologies, new systems are replacing the old ones. As a result, careers are short lived. For example, a computer software employee may begin his career at the age of 25. In a matter of ten years of work, that is, by the time he is 35, he would have had 5 knowledge generations. The experts say that one can upgrade oneself up to 5 generations and beyond that one has to re-learn and not just upgrade. The big question is, if one’s chosen career becomes obsolete by the age of 35, how is he going to handle the rest of his life? The preventive system of Don Bosco guarantees an education that transforms and that prepares students for life. The students are taught how to process, parse, interpret and

use information. They are able to handle the future, adapting themselves to the emerging changes and needs, thus making Don Bosco's dream of preparing honest citizens and good believers a reality.

The explosion of information and its easy access on the palm of one's hand is redefining the role of a teacher. Professor Sugata Mitra's 'Hole in the Wall' project is a clear proof that with technology, self-learning is a possibility and that it is effective as well. If so, what is the role of a teacher? For Don Bosco a teacher is not merely someone who imparts knowledge. A teacher is the one who like a *guru* accompanies the students. He/she leads by example. A teacher plays an important and an indispensable role in the process of education. The students pick up right values, attitudes and a vision of life from their teachers.

## **Conclusion**

I wish to conclude with what a French Educationist said of the system of education of Don Bosco to young Salesians in Europe: "You have works, colleges, and oratories for the young, but you have only one treasure: The Educational Philosophy of Don Bosco. In a world in which youngsters are betrayed, squeezed dry, crushed, exploited, the Lord has entrusted to you a pedagogy in which respect for the young person, for his greatness and his frailty, for his dignity as a son of God prevail. Preserve it, renew it, rejuvenate it, enrich it with all the latest discoveries, and adapt it to these twentieth century creatures and their tragedies that Don Bosco could not have known about. But for heaven's sake, preserve it! Change everything, if necessary lose all your houses but preserve this treasure, forming in thousands of hearts the way to love and to save the young, which is Don Bosco's heritage."

The educative system of Don Bosco is truly a heritage that is passed on to his sons and the rest of the world. It can engage in a meaningful didactic with the 21<sup>st</sup> century educators leading them to a renewed understanding of education and the role of educators today.