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## Salesian pedagogy of accompaniment in the social rehabilitation of minors

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### Abstract

**Research objectives (aims) and problem(s):** The aim of this article is to explore whether, and to what extent, the literature on the social rehabilitation of minors in the Salesian context addresses the issue of pedagogical accompaniment and to consider the direction which this accompaniment should take. The author seeks to answer three main questions:

1. To what extent does the analysis of relevant literature and Salesian practice in social rehabilitation justify the use of the concept of the pedagogy of accompaniment in the context of social rehabilitation in the spirit of Don Bosco?
2. How can this potential concept of accompaniment be understood?
3. If the Preventive System of Don Bosco contains theoretical suggestions related to the concept of a pedagogy of accompaniment, what direction should this accompaniment take, and what dimensions of education and social rehabilitation should it emphasize?

**Research methods:** This article is theoretical in nature and is based on a literature analysis.

**Process of argumentation:** The article is structured as follows:

1. The concept of “accompaniment” in the context of education within the Salesian Preventive System;
2. The direction of accompaniment for socially maladjusted pupils/minors.

**Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences:** The key findings are as follows:

### Keywords:

pedagogical  
accompaniment,  
preventive system,  
Salesian social  
rehabilitation of minors,  
socially maladjusted  
youth

1. The literature on social rehabilitation in the spirit of Don Bosco's Preventive System supports the existence of a pedagogy of accompaniment in the Salesian tradition.
2. In the Salesian spirit, accompanying socially maladjusted youth involves, above all, supporting the development of their identity.
3. Salesian accompaniment also includes helping young people discover pedagogical love and building master–pupil relationships. The essence of educational accompaniment lies in personal contact between educator and pupil – such a relationship allows educators to reach the heart of the young person
4. Salesian accompaniment aims to orient youth toward authority figures and support the discovery of personal values and faith, which in turn could translate into the formation of the minor's sense of values and ethical outlook.
5. In the context of social rehabilitation, accompanying minors in the spirit of Don Bosco also means being physically and actively present among the youth in creative, inspiring, and motivating ways (Salesian assistance).

**Conclusions and/or recommendations:** Viewing socially maladjusted minors through the lens of a pedagogy of accompaniment has pedagogical implications: young people become the main protagonists of their own education: the prime movers and dynamic agents. Salesian accompaniment requires paying close attention to young people during various activities (sports, theater, school) and to their individual abilities, inclinations, talents, and character traits. In the Salesian context, such accompaniment may be expressed using the Jesuit/Ignatian concept of *cura personalis*.

## Introduction

Social maladjustment among young people is a growing problem in Poland, especially over the past few decades. It is usually considered at the social, legal, organizational, and axiological levels (Jaworska, 2012, pp. 153–154). Efforts to rehabilitate socially maladjusted youth in the spirit of Salesian pedagogy have been present in Poland since the 1990s. In the last decade, numerous scholarly publications have explored the issue of minor rehabilitation in the spirit of Don Bosco's Preventive System (Stańkowski, 2015a; Stańkowski, 2018). However, an analysis of the academic literature shows a lack of publications specifically addressing the social rehabilitation of minors from the perspective of the pedagogy of accompaniment.

In light of this gap, the author aims to answer three main questions:

1. To what extent does the analysis of the literature and Salesian rehabilitation practices justify the use of the concept of a pedagogy of accompaniment in the context of social rehabilitation in the spirit of Don Bosco?
2. How can this potential concept of accompaniment be understood?
3. If the Preventive System of Don Bosco includes theoretical suggestions related to a pedagogy of accompaniment, in what direction should this accompaniment go, and which dimensions of education and social rehabilitation should it emphasize?

This article is based on a literature analysis. Its structure follows the sequence established by these three research questions.

### **1. Understanding the term “accompaniment” in the context of education in the Salesian Preventive System**

The concept of *accompaniment* has existed in pedagogical discourse for decades. It stands in contrast to directive upbringing, understood as a non-democratic, authoritarian approach, in which coercion and asymmetry dominate the relationship between educator and pupil. In such a model, the pupil is dependent on and subordinate to the educator, and there is a risk of the young person being molded – or even harmed – according to the educator’s personal vision. In directive education, the pupil/young person does not learn independence, nor are they expected to build a relationship with the educator; obedience and subordination to formal authority are sufficient (see more in Klus-Stańska, 2005). In this context, the well-being of the pupil fades into the background, giving way to mechanisms of coercion and a tendency to treat young people as a homogeneous group.

**Accompaniment in education** falls within the non-directive tradition, which promotes an understanding of education as *traveling together*

*with the child* – being present alongside them in order to serve as an example, an authority, a companion on their journey, while demonstrating empathy and motivating them to grow. In circles that promote Christian education, the concept of a *pedagogy of accompaniment* in the Ignatian spirit is well established. From this perspective, the educator supports the pupil in achieving both their immediate and long-term goals (Marek & Walulik, 2020, pp. 153–166). The educator forms a special bond with the pupil, which becomes the foundation for guiding the young person toward the fullness of their humanity (Biel, 2004, p. 144).

The theme of accompaniment in education is also not foreign to Salesian pedagogy, which grows out of Don Bosco's Preventive System (Chrobak, 2011, p. 85). Looking at Don Bosco's life and pedagogical work with youth, one can discern a clear concept of *educative accompaniment* (Vecchi, 1999, pp. 105–117), expressed in the encounter between master and disciple (for more, see Stańkowski, 2015b, pp. 119–135). In this relationship, Don Bosco – as educator and master – sought to emphasize the subjectivity of the pupil, placing the young person at the center as the protagonist of their own life and the primary agent of their education and future (see also *Encyklopedia Dzieciństwa*, 2022). The educational relationship envisioned in Don Bosco's Preventive System was also founded on the authority of the educator, who was to serve as a father, guide, and friend to his pupils (Braido, 1997, pp. 115–117). Don Bosco's practice of accompanying the young also included cultivating the youth's awareness of their sociopolitical environment and their role in the social, cultural, economic, and legislative life of their region.

In conclusion, it should be stressed that Don Bosco's pedagogical practice correlates closely with contemporary views on interpersonal dialogue, which is a central concept in the personalist philosophy of education. According to this paradigm, dialogue is understood as a mutual exchange that contributes to the personal growth of both parties (for more, see Szudra, 2007, pp. 271–278). Olbrycht (2022) explicitly states that “upbringing is not manipulation, personality ‘engineering,’ or the imposition of positive behavior. It is support and wise, responsible accompaniment in development, in which the pupil's own activity and motivation

are decisive.” Salesian accompaniment of socially maladjusted minors is also consistent with contemporary concepts of social rehabilitation, which foreground respect for the subjectivity of the pupil (Mudrecka, 2006, pp. 597–601).

## **2. Accompanying – what direction to take with a socially maladjusted pupil/minor?**

### **2.1. Building one’s own identity**

The issue of youth identity has been addressed by many contemporary researchers (Majchrzyk, 2011, p. 97). They emphasize, above all, the negative consequences of a lack of identity among youth: a schizophrenic and consumerist lifestyle and susceptibility to a materialistic approach to life (Melosik, 2005, pp. 13–31). From a personalist perspective, the process of self-formation requires the use of reason, the capacity for self-determination, and freedom – that is, the ability to take responsibility for one’s life and transform it from within (Wojtyła, 2000, pp. 151–152).

The issue of identity in education is also widely discussed in the context of the social rehabilitation of socially maladjusted minors. This problem is mainly examined by researchers representing interactional concepts (e.g., changes in social affiliation, emotional reconstruction, activation of creative potential (Konaszewski & Kwadrans, 2018), integration into a culture of need-satisfaction, or social reintegration of the individual) (Urban, 2007), as well as multidimensional concepts (e.g., developing appropriate social attitudes) (Czapów, 1978). Researchers point to the close link between social maladjustment in young people and their often unformed identities. In this context, Konopczyński (2013), among others, points to the need for altering the identity parameters of socially maladjusted individuals: rebuilding how they view themselves and their futures, including their life plans and priorities.

Scholars argue that socially maladjusted individuals exhibit signs of arrested personal development, and that the level of their social maladjustment reflects the state of their identity. In such cases, their identity

is considered “suspended” because the process of identity formation has been interrupted, and personal development is stalled. According to Fidelus (2011, pp. 293–304), remedial and corrective rehabilitation efforts should be oriented toward promoting personal development, building self-esteem, and constructing a coherent identity. Researchers emphasize the importance of subjective agency and the juvenile’s personal involvement in their own social rehabilitation, which nurtures a sense of self-responsibility (Mudrecka, 2013, pp. 149–159; Pospiszyl, 1998, p. 156). Konopczyński (2010, p. 136) points out how important it is to leverage each individual’s inherent potential to overcome difficulties and build identity through a renewed perspective on the surrounding reality.

Viewed in this way, social rehabilitation and the need to concentrate on the construction of a pupil’s identity are consistent with the principles of Salesian preventive education in the context of social rehabilitation. Accompanying a socially maladjusted minor in their process of identity formation, in the spirit of Don Bosco, means supporting their journey toward becoming a mature, good Christian and an honest citizen and human being (Leotta, 2015, pp. 33–45). This form of accompaniment in the field of social rehabilitation requires a consistent, empathetic relationship with the pupil, aimed at building a personal identity grounded in moral and religious values, according to the model of holistic human development.

To re-socialize a pupil in the Salesian spirit means, above all, to encourage the minor to ask themselves fundamental questions about their identity, purpose, and the meaning of life. Identity formation also involves guiding and sensitizing the pupil to the concept of forgiveness: both subjective (forgiving oneself) and objective (forgiving others) (Chrobak, 2016, pp. 85–106). Through this process of forgiveness, a redefinition of personal identity takes place – what might be called a kind of *metanoia*: “I forgive and know how to forgive.”

## 2.2. Building a master–pupil relationship

In both social and pedagogical contexts, there is a growing sense of nostalgia for the figure of the master, as the master–pupil relationship seems to be one of the most natural in education, social life, and culture.



Embracing the master–pupil model involves recognizing the positive influence that exceptional individuals can have on human development, especially on children and youth. In the field of social rehabilitation pedagogy, many scholars stress the importance of adopting the role of Teacher-Master when working with socially maladjusted minors (Bałandynowicz, 2011, pp. 7–11).

The idea of master–pupil accompaniment is also present in Don Bosco’s pedagogical practice (Stańkowski, 2015b, pp. 119–135). In this context, the unconditional acceptance of the pupil is important, as encapsulated in Don Bosco’s well-known declaration to his students: “It is enough that you are young for me to love you.” This statement reveals Don Bosco’s genuine attitude toward the pupil – an acceptance of all their strengths and weaknesses – while maintaining constructive criticism, deep empathy, and tolerance. He recognized each pupil’s individual needs and difficulties, while focusing on their personal growth and development. The essence of the master–pupil relationship in the spirit of Don Bosco’s Preventive System is attentiveness to the pupil’s desire for self-improvement and growth.

In the Preventive System, the concept of self-improvement is closely tied to respect for the pupil’s subjectivity. The development of one’s personality and psychological structure is based on nature and possibilities for development. This type of approach, favoured by Don Bosco, is consistent with the personalistic philosophy as transferred to pedagogy, in which the pupil is regarded as a subject – worthy of full respect, dignity, freedom, and uniqueness as a child of God (Marszałek, 2010, p. 711 ff). In the spirit of the Preventive System, which is steeped in personalist thought, the educator – and by extension, the educational system – must acknowledge the ontic singularity of each pupil, treating them as a unique person. Such an approach positions the pupil as an active participant in the process of education and socialization – capable of self-improvement – not as a passive recipient of educational “proposals,” but as a partner (protagonist or subject) in their own development.

### 2.3. Targeting authority figures

Let us begin by clarifying the etymology of the word *authority*. It derives from the Latin *auctoritas*, originating in *auctor* – meaning “man of trust,” “guarantor-witness,” “originator,” “adviser,” or “model” – and *augere*, meaning “to increase,” “support,” “enrich,” or “perfect” (Sonndel, 1997, p. 92). In today’s cultural and social context, we are witnessing both a decline in respect for authority figures and renewed calls from researchers to reinforce the significance of role models and authority in the lives of young people (Olbrycht, 2014, pp. 23–42).

The issue of authority is re-emerging in public discourse within pedagogy, as the discipline increasingly questions the nature and function of authority in times of educational crisis, as well as its place and relevance in the process of upbringing (Valisowa, 2001, p. 192). In the field of pedagogy, various concepts of authority exist. Okoń describes it as the influence of a person or organization that enjoys broad recognition in a particular sphere of social life (Okoń, 1998, p. 28). Jazukiewicz (2003, p. 254) defines authority as respect, trust, and reverence for a teacher as a scientific expert, counselor, and guide through challenges – as a source of pedagogical influence and a personal role model with whom students identify. This includes a relationship marked by the natural and voluntary subordination of pupils to the teacher.

Authority, in this sense, refers to a relational dynamic in which one person proposes the transmission of values, another acknowledges those values, and consequently submits – willingly or voluntarily – to the influence of someone widely respected by individuals or groups in a particular aspect of social life. The importance of this relationship, especially between teacher and pupil, has been noted by scholars such as Badura (1981, p. 47). Based on this educational philosophy, an authority figure is someone who helps a pupil mature, expands their competencies, and enriches them with new experiences.

Researchers in the field of social rehabilitation point out various characteristics indispensable for educators working in this area. Jaworska (2012, p. 92) argues that an educator should be able to express emotions, show understanding, and offer support – especially when working with



minors. An important contribution to the discussion comes from Machel (1994, p. 118), who maintains that behavioral change in the context of upbringing depends on the involvement of authority figures. Authority is always a condition for educational influence. Without this kind of support, any behavioral changes in minors may be superficial, driven more by calculation and the pursuit of rewards than by genuine transformation (Machel, 2008, p. 228). The authority of an educator requires possessing qualities that enable them to guide and shape a pupil's personality in accordance with social norms and expectations.

In Don Bosco's Preventive System, the educational relationship is founded on the educator's own authority, which must embody the roles of father, guide, and friend to the young. The essence of the educator's authority in this system lies in fatherly love for the pupils. From their first encounter with Don Bosco, young people were captivated by his loving and generous authority. This exceptional educator accompanied his pupils, helping them, above all, to discover and shape their life project. According to Dacquino (1988, p. 128), Don Bosco personified the "model of the good father," not only for his pupils but also for his close collaborators.

From the Salesian perspective, pedagogical authority does not stem only from the educator representing objective moral truths and ethical principles, but rather from embodying these principles – through love, friendship, and generosity toward the pupil. In turn, the pupil recognizes the educator in this way (Braido, 1964, p. 293). When working with socially maladjusted youth, educators should seek to earn moral authority, which is built through inspiring respect, trust, and affection. Understood in this way, the authority of the educator influences the pupil's motivation, sense of duty, and self-determination (Braido, 1999, p. 12; Stańkowski, 2015a, pp. 269–279).

#### **2.4. Accompanying the journey of discovering pedagogical love (it. *amorevolezza*)**

Pedagogical literature rarely addresses the concept of *pedagogical love* – that is, loving the pupil with an educational, guiding love. When discussing the professional competencies of educators working with socially

maladjusted minors, authors tend to emphasize the need for empathic understanding, interpersonal skills (Konaszewski & Kwadrans, 2018, p. 13), respect, and acceptance (Karłyk-Ćwik, 2009, p. 91). However, in such publications, in my opinion, the notion of the educator as someone who demonstrates pedagogical love in their relationship with the pupil is largely overlooked.

It is also worth noting that current juvenile law does not speak of love but rather refers to the overriding social interest, defined as the welfare of the child. In this context, concepts such as tolerance and love have to some extent been replaced by the notion of charity, and their outcomes are framed in terms of the pupil's well-being (Pytko, 2011, p. 32). In the Salesian context, however, authentic, genuine love for young people is, according to Don Bosco unconditional. From a Salesian perspective, young people are worthy of love simply because they are young. This unconditional love from the educator ensures the effectiveness of accompanying the young person on their path toward maturity and social reintegration. Socially maladjusted minors need to feel loved and to know they are loved.

Don Bosco's words emphatically express this unconditional love: "For you I study, for you I work, for you I live, and for you I am also ready to give my life" (*Konstytucje i Regulaminy św. Franciszka Salezego*, 1986, art. 14). Therefore, accompaniment in the Salesian spirit, particularly in the context of social rehabilitation, should center on ensuring that pupils feel loved, respected, trusted, and supported with patience and a willingness to serve.

This sense of pedagogical love is also demonstrated by Salesian educators' commitment to preparing young people for both a profession and for life (De Pieri, 2002). The pupil comes to recognize pedagogical love through this ongoing accompaniment, in the spirit of Don Bosco's principle that "education is a matter of the heart," which can only take place within the interpersonal relationship between educator and pupil.

## 2.5. Accompaniment on the path of discovering values and faith

Researchers agree that the secularization of society has significantly influenced young people, who increasingly express disapproval of religion and the Church. This is often manifested in a neglect or complete

absence of religious practices (Mariański, 2021, p. 201). Recent studies show that among the protective factors that help prevent risky behaviors – alongside a strong bond with family – are regular religious practice and respect for values and social authorities (Szymanowska, 2003, p. 82). Religion thus encourages all believers, including socially maladjusted minors, to turn inward to reflect on their moral values and opens up broader possibilities for effective influence on those who seek to rebuild a sense of purpose in their lives. An illuminating perspective on religion and religious upbringing is put forward by Milerski (2011, p. 137), who argues that this type of education should form the basis for meditating on human existence, ultimately leading to *metanoia* – a transformation of life and an encounter with a personal, transcendent God.

The issue of minors in conflict with the law and the religious dimension of re-education was not overlooked in the reflections and educational practice of Don Bosco (for more see Braido, 2022). The founder of the Salesians made religion an integral part of the formation of the pupil's personality and presupposed the non-coercive participation of the young in sacramental and liturgical life (the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Confession, Marian devotion and the cult of the saints) (Motto, 2022; Niewęglowski, 2011, pp. 82-87). The aim of religious education in Don Bosco's preventive perspective is to orient young people toward salvation and encourage them to strive for holiness through self-betterment. Without religion, education would not only lose its effectiveness but also its fundamental purpose (Desramaut, 1990, p. 39). It is the religious dimension that continuously inspires young people to become active agents in their own development.

According to John Paul II, religion renders Don Bosco's pedagogy transcendent, as it aims to form the child as a believer who is inspired by the figure of Jesus Christ and becomes a courageous witness to their own faith (Jan Paweł II, 2022). In the Salesian model of education related to faith and maturity, some authors identify two additional key elements: the formation of conscience and education in love. In a time when today's youth often misinterpret the essence of human freedom and love, it becomes fundamental for education to emphasize the development of conscience

and social love (Gocko, 2011, pp. 49–52). Furthermore, the Salesian accompaniment of socially maladjusted minors on the path of discovering values and faith is certainly not aimed at converting offenders. Rather, it seeks to awaken in pupils a sense of transcendence, prompting them to seek answers to the most existential questions about their identity and the meaning of life. In this context, healing one's relationship with God and rebuilding self-acceptance based on newly discovered spiritual values becomes a vital part of the process (Stańkowski, 2018, pp. 99–104).

## 2.6. Accompaniment through assistance

In Salesian literature, accompaniment through assistance is understood as guiding the pupil in their continuous effort to become a good Christian and an honest citizen. Assistance, therefore, involves not only the physical presence of the educator among the pupils but also an interpersonal encounter in keeping with the personalist conception of education. At the heart of such education is the principle of accompaniment, which refers to walking alongside the young person. However, this accompaniment cannot be reduced to mere physical presence among young people. According to Cian, educational action remains incomplete and ineffective if it is not based on a personal relationship between the educator and the young person; one lived in an atmosphere of openness and trust that goes beyond personal interests and reaches into the deeper, inner layers of the pupil's life (Cian, 2001, pp. 24–26). This is made possible through the principle of accompaniment, that is, a personal encounter between educator and pupil.

The traditional oratory was once the privileged place for this kind of encounter and educational accompaniment; today, it also occurs in schools, educational centers, and parishes (Misiaszek, 2012, pp. 256–266). Vodičar (2023, pp. 1–14) even emphasizes the importance of being present among young people in virtual spaces – assisting them in the digital world. In such a context, in a family-like atmosphere characterized by a paternal and fraternal style – pupils have the opportunity to encounter genuine educational authorities. They can grow in their sense of individuality, freedom, and dignity, all within an environment shaped by Christian values.

In this atmosphere, young people feel that adults are truly accompanying and supporting them on their journey toward both human and Christian maturity (Nowak, 2008, pp. 461–464).

## Conclusions

The analysis leads to the following conclusions: The literature on social rehabilitation in the spirit of Don Bosco's Preventive System supports the existence of a pedagogy of accompaniment, including in the Salesian context. Accompanying socially maladjusted youth in the Salesian spirit entails first and foremost supporting the development of the pupil's identity and preparing them for their future (including vocational training). In light of this, accompaniment also means helping minors discover pedagogical love (*amorevolezza*) and building master–pupil relationships. The core of educational accompaniment is precisely the personal connection between educator and pupil. In Salesian accompaniment, the pupil becomes the main protagonist in their own education: the key agent and driving force of their personal development.

Salesian accompaniment involves closely observing the pupil during various activities (such as sports, theater, and school) and attending to their unique abilities, inclinations, talents, and character traits. In Jesuit/Ignatian terminology, such personalized engagement is referred to as *cura personalis*. Furthermore, Salesian accompaniment for socially maladjusted youth seeks to orient them toward role models and to support the discovery of values and personal faith, which in turn may contribute to the development of their value system and ethical worldview.

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