BOOK REVIEWS


This book revolves around the educational ideas of Don Lorenzo Milani, an Italian Catholic priest and his political commitment to education for social justice, particularly in the empowerment of the poor. The main part of this book consists of a translation of the *Lettera ad una Professoressa*, which was written by Milani’s students attending his school in the remote Tuscan village of Barbiana. The translation is accompanied by extremely well researched notes and detailed commentaries in a section that follows the translated letter and an introduction and translator’s note, written by the authors and presented just before the translation of the letter. The book also includes a foreword by Peter Mayo, a prologue by Domenico Simeoni, a republished interview with Eduardo Martinelli, one of the eight boys who co-authored the letter and an epilogue by Adele Corradi, a teacher at the Barbiana school.

In reading this book, one immediately understands why the authors are deeply taken by Lorenzo Milani’s thoughts and philosophy of education. The letter is a manifesto of the political and educational responsibilities that Milani managed to install in his students. It is a demonstration of the pedagogical passions that effectively convince his students to voice the injustices of an educational system that repeatedly fails them. Don Milani managed to develop their political actions for social justice through the pedagogical principle of ‘I care’.

Carmel Borg, Mario Cardona and Sandro Caruana share Milani’s political and educational convictions. As educators themselves, they reiterate the ‘I care’ maxim convinced that they can infuse similar commitments in all teachers and student teachers by making the letter accessible to them. The authors clearly find parallels between the injustices experienced by the Barbiana students and those of students today. The authors are deeply conscious of the fact that many students are not getting the quality education they are entitled to, that parental involvement in school is low, that assessment of students goes against the very educational aims they should be promoting and that schools are failing their students. The authors make good use of *Letter to a Teacher* to revive the critical and radical spirit in the educational and the social contexts that are becoming increasingly rightist, neo-liberal and interested in reproducing the privileges and interests of the dominant few. The authors are conscious that schools teach children to think solely of what is advantageous to them and to remain silent to the systematic injustices reproduced by the school.
The acts of translation engaged by the authors are also a reflection of such radical political commitment. Their use of English, which is considered the language of the coloniser, is used strategically to disseminate critical consciousness against the dominant language. Milani himself used to insist on the need for translation of the classical texts of writers such as Homer, Foscolo, Manzoni and others. Milani was convinced that students in Barbiana were entitled to read these texts in their own language, which is not solely and purely Italian but an Italian language which is alive; that manages to speak to them. One understands that Milani wanted to give his students the cultural capital they lacked, without forgetting or rejecting their own.

The translation of Borg, Cardona & Caruana truly vindicates the cultural capital of the Barbiana students. Their material poverty certainly does not reflect the richness of their thoughts and of their prosperous sensitivities to the eradication of social inequalities. This translation of *Letter to a Teacher* renders the voice of the students, classic. It transforms the culture of these children into a cultural capital that teachers today cannot do without. Milani states that translation provides a living language to those who are poor, it is not driven by polemical debate and is instigated by the desire to break down privileges. Milani’s words describe precisely the aims of the authors of this book. Their love for those who are marginalised from and by the school is as strong as their contempt for the abuse of the power of the privileged few. The authors’ work of translation, therefore, is evidently also politically and educationally loaded.

This point reminds one of Spivak’s (1993) ‘The politics of translation’. Unfortunately, Spivak uses a language which cannot be widely read. Her texts are a hard door at which readers have to knock several times before they access the political ideas hidden behind it. Nevertheless, in spite of the contradictions of using a difficult language, in Spivak’s text one can find the magic word that allows the poor to enter the entitled cave of riches.

There are two particularly important points in Spivak’s work that are relevant to this book *Letter to a Teacher* and particularly to aspects of translation that are discussed in the Translator’s Note. Spivak explains that when she was translating the writings of Indian women she had to unlearn the way she had been taught to translate. She states that school has taught her to reproduce a collection of precise synonyms. Translation, she argues, is deeper than this and translators are challenged by a series of ambivalent decisions. Translators have to be faithful to the text, they have to become engaged with the text, but on the other hand, they have the power to extend its meaning. They cannot forget their presence in the political connections of translation. Such ambivalence is clearly evident in the Translators’ Note in Borg, Cardona & Caruana’s book. The note shows the translators’ desire to surrender to the text they are translating. They acknowledge
that ‘in this translated version the main priority has been to limit the distance from
the original text as much as possible’ (p. 22). However, later on in the same note
they explain how difficult it was for them to do this, as the language they are using
(English) cannot copy exactly the Italian language. The notes on commentaries on
the text are meant to fill in the gaps between the two languages. One major
interesting point here is their comment that when they did not manage to find
words in English that reflect what is intended in Italian they ‘use sentence
structures and lexical items which may not correspond to what one might expect
in formal, written English style’ (p. 25).

As translators they have chosen to go beyond official languages that fix
meanings. Spivak explains that ‘in translation, ... meaning hops into the spacey
emptiness between two named historical languages. Translation has to do with
loss of boundaries, loss of control, dissemination’ (Spivak, 1993, p. 180).

Spivak also insists that good translation involves the translators delving into
the conditions and contexts of the texts rather than translating meanings
superficially. The different sections of the book have this function of putting the
reader into the pictures of the historical, political and social contexts from which
the letter took shape.

One last issue that needs to be outlined is that of the agency of translators, in
their acts of translation. Translators are not passive and cannot completely
surrender to the text. They are agents of language and approach texts just like
directors of plays or actors interpreting scripts. Spivak describes the relation of the
translator to the text as a love relation. Translation facilitates the relation between
the original and its shadow. Translators are possessed as if lovers possessed by
love. The eroticism of the relation is ethical in that through translation one
recognises the ‘other’ that can never be replicated. Translation reminds the
translators of their cultural difference from the text which is being translated.

Borg, Cardona & Caruana’s book is an example of the love relation that the
authors have with the text. This relation is also ethical in that they recognise the
‘other’ in the students of Barbiana, but especially in the educational processes,
including that of translation, that are committed to the dissemination of a
pedagogy that makes difference.

Reference


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Many schools assume that it is logically possible to teach religious education in schools and that it can be taught in a non-confessional manner. However, some philosophers have argued that non-confessional religious education is not possible without imparting religious beliefs. This book is considered significant because it attempts to explore logically the debate by presenting arguments and views of different philosophers.

Hand begins his book by outlining the main arguments in the introduction chapter, particularly focusing on the possibility of imparting religious understanding without imparting religious belief. His concern is to discuss whether teaching religious education in schools is a futile practice, examining the claim that ‘non-confessional religious education is a logically incoherent enterprise because religious understanding presupposes religious belief articles’ (p. 2).

It is clear that Hand’s book centres around Hirst’s papers. In the first chapter, Hand uses Hirst’s papers (see Hirst, 1975) to initiate the discussion. Hirst’s premises that ‘i) religion is a logically unique form of knowledge, and ii) understanding it involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false’ (p. 4) are examined in conjunction with Wittgenstein’s (1953) ideas in his Philosophical Investigations. Interestingly, Hand includes the arguments of various philosophers – such as Marples, Attfield, Gardner, and the ‘river-bed’ propositions – to make the reader consider the issue from different angles. He does this by cleverly dissecting each layer of the philosophers’ arguments, whether supporting or opposing Hirst’s premises, with the support of Wittgenstein’s argument. Basically, Hand’s first chapter sets out the agenda of the whole discussion by showing the flaws, not only in Hirst’s arguments but also in arguments of the key contributors to the debate.

Hirst’s second premise that ‘understanding a unique form of knowledge involves holding certain propositions of that form to be true or false’ is scrutinised in Hand’s second chapter. Here, the ambiguity of Hirst’s arguments for his second premise is elucidated with the help of Pring (1976), Wilson (1979) and Brent (1978). Hand concludes his second chapter with the restatement of the forms of knowledge thesis by presenting the taxonomy of three categories of proposition; necessary, mental and material propositions; and a logical space that introduces contingent propositions about non-material public referents. It is the latter proposition (i.e., contingent proposition about non-material public referents) that would allow the possibility of being moral and religious forms of knowledge.
However, the discussion whether or not religious propositions would take this form of knowledge, is ensued in the third chapter.

The third chapter examines several philosophers’ attempts to show that religious propositions constitute an autonomous epistemological class. Hand claims that if religious beliefs are prescriptions which are considered to be binding (as argued by Wittgenstein or as Philip claims that they are expressions of feeling), then they would neither be beliefs nor beliefs of a distinct epistemological kind. On the other hand, if religious beliefs are referred to Hudson’s transcendent conscious agents, Wisdom’s patterns of human reactions, or Brent’s autonomous personal beings, then they would belong to epistemological categories that are already familiar to us, hence losing its distinctiveness. Hand also examines Leahy and Laura’s account of religious beliefs that refer to non-material public referents viewed by the believers, which he considers as implausible and incoherent. In concluding his third chapter, Hand sets his task to present a positive account of the meaning of religious propositions so as to identify their epistemological class(es) in the next chapter.

Chapter four displays the thoroughness of Hand’s research in philosophy of religion as he delineates the concept of religion and propositions about god not only from different religious perspectives, but also from a philosophical perspective. His arguments that gods are transcendent (comprise of minds) or superhuman persons (comprise of minds and bodies) lead to his assumptions that propositions about gods constitute familiar epistemological classes of mental and material propositions. Since religion does not constitute a unique form of knowledge and only involves truth claims of familiar epistemological kinds, he concludes that the proposition that teaching for religious understanding without imparting religious belief is a coherent one.

The final chapter clarifies and expands the discussion on the distinction between mental and material propositions, which has been set out in the second chapter. Hand also counters the behaviourist contention that mental propositions are reducible to material ones. He argues that though we may not be able to establish the existence of other minds with logical certainty, we can make reasonable inferences to other minds from the appearance and behaviour of other bodies.

A believer of a religion who reads Hand may disagree with this contention, particularly if the believer accepts that his/her religion is a unique form of knowledge. Holding on to this assumption entails many conditions, including the commitment of the believer toward his/her religion. Readers who agree that Hand’s contention is correct do so because they are not committed to the religion as s/he regards religious knowledge as not only unique, but mere propositions about religions and gods.
A point worth noting is that the discussions in the book centre around the general understanding of all religions in general. However an ‘eye or an individual of faith’ would have a deeper understanding of his/her religion, hence the view that religion is a unique form of knowledge would apply to him/her. On this account, I would argue that whether religion is a unique form of knowledge or whether it refers to familiar epistemological class or classes is not a discussion that can take place in an objective manner. It depends on the individual’s readiness to accept the former or latter. A class that is learning about religious education would hold on to the latter’s view, but a class of a religious school children learning about their religion would agree on the former. After all, truth cannot be objectively proven, but ultimately remains with the individual. Nevertheless, readers can be persuaded by the force of argument and truth is necessarily established in this way. Following this line of argument, Hand’s attempt to resolve the debate about logical possibility of religious education by examining the claim that there is a religious form of knowledge, to a certain extent, has been successful.

References


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This book is the first volume of the five World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) series. It originates from discussions held at an international congress in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 2007. The book consists of 17 chapters contributed by scholars from different countries.

The central argument of this book is set out in the following quote: ‘In the name of globalization reform has become in many cases the essential tool of political systems to initiate change that often displaces other – more culturally relevant – arrangements’ (p. 2). This book explores the ‘contextual meanings of those culturally relevant arrangements’ (p. 2) from comparative viewpoints. It helps the reader to appreciate: (i) ‘the effects of (global) educational reform on teaching and learning’; (ii) ‘the policies and politics where reform occurs’; and (iii) ‘the role of the curriculum and experiences in education institutions’ (p. 3), mainly in the field of teacher education in different countries.

The following is a synopsis of the chapters of the book. Chapters of the book are arranged basically by contents and the methodology utilised for research introduced in the book. Chapter 1 (Reforming teacher and learning: comparative perspectives in a global era) is written by the editors as an introduction and summary of the book. Chapter 2 (Reforming teacher education in Latin America and the USA: a comparative perspective through critical discourse analysis) presents some similarities between teacher education policies in Latin and North America by utilising a critical discourse analysis based on three main documents. Chapter 3 (Imagined globalisation in Italian education: discourse and action in initial teacher training) explores the ‘forms of imagined (discursive) globalisation’, ‘internationality’ (p. 23) and the ‘dilemma’ (p. 34) between an English model which is appraised in recent Italian policy documents and the Italian tradition by analysing a wide range of official documents, journals and articles. Chapter 4 (Policy, practices and persistent traditions in teacher education in South Africa: the construct of teaching and learning regimes) discusses how traditional viewpoints of teaching and learning affect the new requirements of education policy in South Africa by interviewing scholars and staff in three faculties in South Africa.

In Chapter 5 (Documentation for diffusion of education reform in Egypt: rationale, approach, and initial experiences), there is a discussion about the possibility of implementing a variety of methods in a research topic. Chapter 6 (Global trends in teaching employment: challenges for teacher education and development policies) utilises some data from two key sources of UNESCO to form
a discussion about trends on teacher education, employment and reforms in economies and globalisation. Chapter 7 (Qualified teacher status, one indicator of the teaching profession’s standards: lessons for California from Finland, Ireland, and Korea) analyses standards and the status of teachers in three countries in comparison with California by exploring mainly the ‘requirements for qualified teacher status’, educational/school system and its performance in respective countries.

In Chapter 8 (Japanese technical cooperation to enhance teacher quality in developing countries: a multiple case study in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Cambodia), the research is conducted through three projects organised by JICA in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Cambodia. The authors are involved in one of the projects as technical advisors as well as researchers. Chapter 9 (A comparative analysis of teacher competences in England and Finland) explores what levels and types of competency are required by teachers in order to facilitate cultural change at schools in England and Finland with an analysis of project-based data. Chapter 10 (Teacher education in Serbia: towards a competence-based model of initial teacher education) also discusses several teacher competences which are regarded as being vital by teachers and educators in Serbia, using the research method of the Tuning project. Chapter 11 (Pre-service secondary school teachers’ use of symbols and algebraic relationships in Turkey) examines pre-service secondary mathematics teachers’ understanding and usage level of algebraic relationships and symbols in Turkey by questioning and interviewing the teachers.

In Chapter 12 (Teachers’ concerns profile regarding the reformed mathematics curriculum in Turkey), a questionnaire about the 6th grade teachers’ concerns on the recent reform of mathematics curriculum in Turkey is analysed. Chapter 13 (Health education: analysis of teachers’ and future teachers’ conceptions from 16 countries in Europe, Africa and Middle East) discusses teachers’ conceptions about health education in sixteen countries with the analysis of a questionnaire according to a KVP model. In Chapter 14 (Sex education: analysis of teacher’s and future teacher’s conceptions from 12 countries of Europe, Africa and Middle East), data from a questionnaire about conceptions on sex education in twelve countries through the Biohead-Citizen project were analysed. Chapter 15 (Teachers’ linguistic and cultural potentials: empowering new school practice in France and Switzerland) discusses multicultural and multilingual environments in French and Swiss schools by utilising data collected by interviews, school visits and training sessions between 2003 and 2008. Chapter 16 (Knit together for a better service: towards a culture of collegiality in teaching science in Sri Lanka) explores how to develop teachers’ potentials and make reforms work successfully through interviews, observations and documents in five schools. Chapter 17 (School projects in France: management strategies and state disengagement) shows the results of a research project undertaken to find the role of school inspectors in French primary schools.
The book highlights some important issues affecting the implementation of educational reforms and programmes in both developed and developing countries. Research in the book shows that reforms and programmes in teacher education are often affected by financial, social, political, cultural, historical and religious issues. For example, it indicates that ‘institutional histories and traditions are powerful shapers of academics’ responses to policy directives as they undertake the processes of curriculum making for teacher education’ (p. 41). It is also pointed out that the ‘social and political history of a country has immense implications for improving the schools’ and ‘[w]ithout an understanding and appreciation for this aspect of educational assistance, donors of such assistance will find their task impossibly difficult’ (p. 125). It shows how teachers’ work in developing countries is ‘vulnerable to global trends in education, the economy and employment’ (p. 91). More importantly, ‘[i]f teachers are well-informed and convinced of the benefits of the reform movement, they can alleviate their concerns and focus on looking for ways to improve the program both individually and holistically’ (p. 194). A wide variety of analytical, empirical and theoretical research methods are utilised in the book. A widespread methodology allows the reader to assess their characteristics, benefits and drawbacks for particular research.

The provision and acquisition of education relating to basic knowledge and skills are fundamental and essential for all children. The research in the book has rightly placed the greatest importance on them. Furthermore, some countries have already established in their laws what to teach and/or how to teach, thereby succeeding in providing a ‘good’ education system enabling children to acquire basic knowledge and skills. Some of these countries are now attempting to provide pupils with education tailored to individual needs, interests, aptitudes and abilities. With the foundation of basic knowledge and skills firmly established, it would also be very beneficial to consider education tailored to individual needs, interests, aptitudes and abilities in the future.

To summarise, this book is worth reading in order to consider teacher education in certain countries and its role in providing pupils with education for basic knowledge and skills. The book can also provide some ideas for research methods if necessary. It would be very interesting to explore how the research findings in the book affect teacher education in practice in their country. Some research has described educational and political movements within a country, and these should be well known. However, simple knowledge of the movements cannot change the reality of the situation. It would therefore be of more benefit if the research introduced a more detailed process aimed at the realisation of educational and political goals.

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‘...the primary school curriculum has become saturated with documents, strategies, targets and testing, testing, testing. So much so that sometimes there may appear to be so many accountability boxes to be ticked and plans to complete that fundamental aspects of literacy can be forgotten’ (p. 2).

The starting-point for Robin Campbell’s book is that reading stories with young children – variously known as story reading, storybook reading or read-alouds in different countries – is the most fundamental aspect of literacy. Children who are read to and with, become readers; those who are deprived of stories and books fail to make gains in literacy. As schools have more targets to meet, busy teachers feel guilt at engaging in such a pleasurable activity as reading a story or sharing books with their pupils. And yet, Campbell is insistent that without this shared love of stories, children will fail to make the progress they need to meet the literacy targets.

For those of us who share his obvious passion for passing on not just literacy, but a love of books and stories to our children, this book is timely. Despite gains made technically in literacy through recent intervention strategies and literacy strategies, children here in the UK, seem to enjoy reading less. Teachers of young children feel pressure to talk about the technical aspects of books every time they share one with their class, to point out and teach where words rhyme or alliterate, to discuss features of plot, setting or character, and so sharing books has become more teaching than pleasure. Following Campbell’s advice here might both restore the pleasure for teachers and, more importantly, children, and make our children readers who enjoy reading.

The book is aimed at ‘teachers of young children, teaching assistants and all those who work with young children’ and to show parents how reading might be ‘developed in educational settings’. It would also be an ideal introduction for student teachers. There is such a skilful blend of scholarly researched text, transcriptions of home and classroom dialogue, examples of activities to follow on from books and photographs of children’s work, that the reader feels drawn into the home or class and the world of children’s stories. As a former teacher of young children, so much of this book resonates for me with memories of similar conversations and signs of progress in children’s engagement with books and stories.

Here are some much-loved favourites; The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Rosie’s Walk and Hairy Maclary from Donaldson’s Dairy, to mention just a few. For those unsure of what might be a successful book to choose to read with children, a good
place to start would be Campbell’s reference list of children’s books. He expands on some of the features of what contributes to success in chapters on ‘The importance of narrative and quality books’, and ‘Reading stories in the classroom: getting started’. For those unused to reading to children, there is good advice here for the first few occasions: how to prepare before reading; how to ‘perform’ the reading by using voice and timing; and ways of involving the children during it.

The second half of the book discusses more structured work with children’s literacy from stories: features of print and how to develop children’s knowledge of letters, sounds and words (Chapter 5); developing activities such as role play or using puppets, writing and drawing, making books, art and crafts, linking to songs and rhymes (Chapter 6); ways of encouraging children’s own reading skills through shared reading, sustained silent reading, the use of buddies and pairs, literature circles, individual and guided reading (Chapter 7). This leads on to the introduction of children’s emergent writing skills and cross-curricular work from stories, particularly focusing on mathematics, science and social studies.

For all of this, there is a comprehensive set of references to enable the reader to follow any of these points further, which makes this particularly suitable for the student teacher starting out, but provides others with a window into the research on which the book is based. All of this research is shared lightly throughout, so that the book is immensely readable and as enjoyable as one of the stories Campbell recommends.

He concludes that his book ‘has emphasised the literacy learning which can follow from the well prepared and enthusiastic reading of a story’, and ‘The enjoyment children receive from story readings sparks their desire to read for themselves in a way no worksheet can ever emulate’ (p. 120). For those who would like to know how to provide children with both literacy learning and enjoyment from stories, this book is a good place to begin.

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