

ITALIAN SIGNPOSTS FOR A SOCIOLOGICALLY & CRITICALLY ENGAGED PEDAGOGY

DON LORENZO MILANI (1923-1967) AND THE SCHOOLS OF SAN DONATO AND BARBIANA REVISITED¹

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ABSTRACT This paper provides a critical exposition and analysis of the work of an acclaimed Italian educator, Lorenzo Milani and ideas that emerged from his experiences in two Tuscan localities. His work is well known in Italy, and many parts of Southern Europe. Despite the translations of his works into English and Spanish, in the early 70s, and their use in sociology of education classes in the UK, he seems to have had a very limited impact on the Anglo-North American dominated critical education field. The paper revisits his ideas, in this 90th anniversary year, indicating their contemporary relevance and the signposts they provide for a critically and sociologically engaged pedagogy.

It can be argued that there are figures from various parts of the world who can be looked up to as paragons in the field of critical education and especially critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is based on the belief that “education is fundamental to democracy and that no democratic society can survive without a formative culture shaped by pedagogical practices capable of creating the conditions for producing citizens who are critical, self-reflective, knowledgeable, and willing to make moral judgments and act in a socially responsible way”(Giroux, 2011, 3).

Lorenzo Milani, an educator, writer and priest from Tuscany, is arguably Italy’s most heralded critical pedagogue. His writings and teachings would be worth revisiting in search of signposts for a sociologically informed and critically engaged pedagogy.

Some of Lorenzo Milani's writings and others with which he is strongly associated, such as the *Letter to a Teacher* (henceforth *Lettera*)¹, have been translated into and published in English. Despite this, Milani has been given scant attention in the English speaking world, except for an Open University (UK) course in Sociology of Education, 'Schooling and Society' (E 202) that started in 1974 and fore-grounded the *Lettera*.² This paper will highlight some of the main features of Milani's critical approach to education, starting off with a biographical introduction.

Biographical introduction: Lorenzo Milani (1923-1967)³

Lorenzo Milani hailed from Tuscany and was born into a very privileged family in Florence. Milani's father was a university professor, his grandfather an acclaimed archaeologist and his great grandfather an internationally renowned philologist. Milani's parents were atheist.³ The parents went through the motions of conveniently marrying in the Catholic Church - they were Jews and feared Fascist persecution. Milani had his mortifying moments such as when he was pulled up by a woman for eating white bread in an alley inhabited by poor people or when he would ask the family chauffer to drop him off at some distance from school, so that his school mates would not see him being afforded such treatment⁴ (Fallaci, 1993, 13, 14).

Milani defied his family by joining an art academy instead of the 'taken for granted' university. Nevertheless his family background gave him the confidence to speak his own mind. It was probably through painting that he drew closer

to the Catholic faith. He eventually decided to receive holy confirmation and, years later, joined the seminary, eventually being ordained priest in 1947.

Milani's solidarity with the oppressed was strengthened by his reading of the gospels.

After a short spell at Montespertoli, he was sent to the mainly working class and peasant inhabited San Donato di Calenzano where he led an evening 'popular school'

for adults, which, he insisted, had to be devoid of all religious symbols to

attract people of different political persuasions (Simeone, 1996, 99). Milani regarded conversion as an act of grace and not something that can be taught. (Ibid.) His classes

dealt with a range of subjects many of which related to class politics and oppression.

Invited speakers were challenged by the course participants who were encouraged to

prepare the topic beforehand. This and his own unorthodox approach to religion and

pastoral work proved too much for influential figures in the San Donato community and

sections of the clergy. He was 'exiled' to an obscure locality, Sant'Andrea a Barbiana, a

fate he accepted as part of God's 'grand design' (Milani, 2011). Barbiana lacked basic

infrastructural amenities; the only road leading to the settlement of a few households

ended a kilometre away.

There Milani developed his best known educational project, a full time school for 'drop outs' from the public school system and developed an alternative radical pedagogy.

He also wrote his controversial *Esperienze Pastorali*, which created a furor in Catholic

circles and was removed from the bookstores at the behest of those high up in

the church hierarchy. Milani also co-wrote, with his students, a series of letters including

the *Lettera* and the letters in defence of the right to conscientious objection to

military conscription (Milani, 1991). He was struck by Hodgkin disease and died at the age of 44.

‘68 and all that!

The *Lettera*, written in reaction to two Barbiana students being denied access to a teacher preparation school (Gesualdi, S, 2007, VII, VII), had some influence on the ‘68 movement in Italy. The iconic Italian intellectual, Pier Paolo Pasolini called it a “wind of vitality”, a book that provokes laughter following which tears come to one’s eyes...The specific subject matter of *Lettera a una Professoressa* is the school but, in reality, it [the book] is about Italian society, present Italian life.”⁴ The book served as a kind of ‘manifesto’ in the struggle for reform of the Italian educational system.

Milani’s influence was great among those who opted for a conscientious objection to military conscription. The works invited comparison with Freire’s (see Mayo, 2007). What seems plausible is that both Milani and exponents of critical pedagogy drew from the critique of bourgeois institutions that emerged from France. It is well known that Milani was *au courant* with French literature on which certain critical educators drew.

Radical Christianity

Like Freire, Milani’s pedagogy is Christian-inspired. As for Freire, one can safely say that two strands characterise his work, namely Christianity and Marxism, which is typical of his Latin American context and Liberation Theology.

Milani's main underlying sources are the Gospels. While Gramsci's works were read at the school (see Borg & Mayo, 2007, 115), there is no evidence of Marxist thinking as an important underlying source.

Milani's attitude towards socialism was ambivalent. He criticised the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Catholic Church for vying with each other and, consequently, selling young working class people short in the various Italian localities with which he was familiar. In his view, they placed more emphasis on entertainment, such as carnival balls (Milani, 2004), than on education, with a view to swelling membership in the PCI's case or winning over souls in the Church's case.

Milani had no problems with socialism as an ideology, despite his occasional reference to the excesses of 'actually existing socialism'. In fact, Milani said that democracy and socialism are the noblest political systems granted to humanity (Milani, 1988a, 25). He considered socialism "the highest attempt of humankind to give, already on this earth, justice and equality to the poor." (Ibid, p. 26)

In the *Lettera*, Milani and his pupils express an almost cynical attitude towards parties in Italy. They do not differentiate between the dominant parties in Italian political life (the 'graduates' political parties), which allow representatives of the dominant social classes to legislate on behalf of the poor. "But we have to get into Parliament. The whites will never pass the laws that the blacks need." (Borg *et al*, 2009, 107). The assumption here is that even those parties that ostensibly represent the interests of the working class, the socialist and communist parties, were the preserve of the dominant classes. The authors also state that working class and peasant class people, who made it through the

formal education system, against the odds, and entered parliament, were often 'embourgeoised' in the process.

In the words of Edoardo Martinelli, one of the eight authors of the *Lettera*, Milani's dreamt not of the 'liberation' of people from farming but of a liberated farmer content with living a sober life. (Martinelli in Borg & Mayo, 2007, 113) The focus here is on helping to raise the collective political and cultural level of a class rather than on individual 'upward social mobility' that would not end the exploitative relationship itself.

Gender and ethnic difference

It would appear that the kind of critical education promoted at Barbiana was predominantly male oriented, even though women were also involved in the text's preparation (Gesualdi, S, 2007, X). The imagined target of the critique is a woman teacher (see Galea, 2010). It was originally meant as a protest letter addressed to the very same woman teacher who had denied the two Barbiana students entry to the magisterial school.

Lorenzo also spoke, albeit in a strong moralising tone, about the dignity of women within what he denounced as a society gripped by the consumer culture ideology. One must also recognise his efforts to persuade parents from the region to send their daughters to the school at Barbiana. These efforts were frustrated as a result of the mentality that prevailed in the contexts where Milani worked. There was also fear of the dangers lurking in the areas around the road leading to Barbiana, the sort of dangers that, the authors of the *Lettera* insisted, would have scared off those very same teachers, from the public schooling system, who had flunked them.

Not even one girl came from the town. Maybe it was because the road was hard. Maybe it's the mentality of the parents. They think a woman can live her life even if she has a chicken's brain. Males do not ask them to be intelligent. (Borg *et al.*, 2009, 39)

And yet we come across illustrations indicating that girls attended this school (Milani, 2004, 74-76), albeit a minority; they were probably from the village itself and not from the town. They appear in illustrations such as that capturing an open-air geography lesson. This lesson involves help with reading provided by some of the youths of San Donato, thus indicating that links between the two schools, those of Barbiana and Calenzano, remained strong. We are also shown a rather sex-stereotypical lesson on 'cutting and sewing' (an 'all girls' class).

Overall, however, the attempt was to develop a school enriched by different identities. Italian society was at the time hardly the multiethnic society it is today. And yet this writing and other episodes from Milani's life seem to suggest a strong awareness of social differentiation within the power structure: "Because there is nothing as unjust as trying to create equality among those who are not equal." (Borg *et al.*, 2009, 155)

Lorenzo Milani's sense of human solidarity extended beyond national, class, gender and ethnic boundaries. The notion of 'patria' is given short shrift in his and the students' writings. It is also the object of repudiation with respect to its invocation, throughout history, which provided the licence for predatory incursions on defenceless foreign territories. Students were sent to different territories abroad where they would mix with people of different ethnicities, something unlikely to have happened in and around Barbiana or Italy at that time.

Metaphors chosen to describe the discriminatory nature of the power structure in Italian society suggest parallels with undemocratic race-relations in the USA. The reference to Afro-American struggles, and to Stokely Carmichael, from the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, also indicates that the range of solidarity among oppressed groups included solidarity with ethnically subaltern groups. An Albert Schweitzer collaborator, who visited the school, was pulled up for her patronizing European ‘missionary’ treatment and representation of Africans (Martinelli, in Borg & Mayo, 2007, 114).

Blood, Sweat and Tears

One also notes the regime of austerity and discipline imposed by Milani at his school. This reflects the austerity of Milani’s life as a cleric and his seminary preparation in Florence. The approach would certainly not go down well with those accustomed to modern day theories regarding the role of play in human learning and development. As with Gramsci, this austerity is based on the notion that working class students need to work hard, shedding ‘blood, sweat and tears,’ to acquire that which comes almost naturally to middle class children (the ‘figli di papà - daddy’s children), through their cultural capital and *habitus*. These privileged children consider such institutions as the universities and parliament, each sustained through public funds, via direct and indirect taxation of workers and peasants, as their natural preserve.

This explains Milani’s emphasis on rigour and on alternative ways of educating pupils which makes them experience a sense of ownership of the learning programme and see learning as preferable to working long hours in the labour intensive fields. Milani was to write, with regard to the school schedule, that City people are amazed at

the amount of time involved - twelve hours a day, 365 days a year. Before Milani arrived at Barbiana, the children observed the same tiring schedule to provide city people with wool and cheese. (Milani,1988 b, 54).

Any watering down of curricula for underprivileged groups is likely to keep them immersed in their position of social subordination. If anything, they require even more rigour to make up for the fact that the ruling classes obtain this knowledge and pass it on to their offspring not only through schools but also through their cultural milieu. Working class children and members of other subaltern groups, such as certain ethnic minorities, do not enjoy have this privilege and require more time to master this knowledge.

Education, Politics, ‘Class Suicide’ and Social Justice

Critical pedagogues have helped educators develop sensitivity to the politics of knowledge. (Freire, 1985, 80) Echoing Freire, they insist that education is not neutral and involves educating for either domestication or liberation, being either on the side of the privileged or oppressed. In his Letter to the Military Chaplains, Milani forcefully reveals his option:

If you persist in claiming the right to divide the world into Italians and foreigners, then I must say to you that, in your view of things, I have no Fatherland. I would then want the right to divide the world into disinherited and oppressed on one side, and privileged and oppressors on the other. One group is my Fatherland; to me the others are foreigners. (Milani, 1988a,19)

He believed in a committed educator, one who takes sides: ‘Better a fascist than indifferent!’ ”(Martinelli, in Borg & Mayo, 2007, 113) Echoing Amilcar Cabral, Paulo Freire argued that revolutionary activists, and therefore revolutionary educators, need to commit ‘class suicide’; they must unlearn and renounce their privilege to work on the side of the oppressed.

Don Lorenzo Milani came close to the idea of a person committing class suicide. He renounced his own privileges being careful not to live above the level of his impoverished parishioners. He denounced his own education which reflected his country's imperialistic ambitions: "I jumped with joy for the Empire!" He denounced the element of deceit as information was withheld from their young impressionable minds. They (the pupils) were not informed that poisonous gas was used against a defenceless people in Ethiopia who, with hindsight, appeared to Milani to claim the moral high-ground since they had done nothing to the Italians. In short, he denounced the school for its imperialist propaganda, predicated on lies and misinformation, and which prepared them as pupils and young citizens for the horrors that were to transpire during the Nazi-Fascist period. (Milani, 1988b, 65)

Milani went a step further and held the social class to which he belonged responsible for the horrors of the imperialist wars (Milani, 1988b, 62). Despite being a Jew, which rendered him and the rest of his family liable to persecution by the, he was also a member of that same bourgeoisie that was responsible for the terrible turn of events in Italian politics. The commonly held view is that this class acted this way to safeguard its privileges. This no doubt was to have, in his mind and that of others, lasting residues. The letters to the military chaplains and the judges have pedagogical implications for the way we read and teach European history. It is the sort of reading history against the grain intended to dispel myths and undermine the degree of sanitization and 'white washing,' for instance concerning the Risorgimento (see Aprile, 2010), which has extended beyond Italian shores. The Barbiana focus was on the search for a 'just war that does not exist.'

This general reading of history is intertwined with Milani's reading of the history of the social class to which he belonged. The relevant comments express his revulsion at the lengths to which this class would go to defend its privileges.

In his later years as a priest, when visibly conscious of the fact that resources were limited and wary of the emerging consumerism at the time, Milani chose a life of sobriety, austerity and poverty, a practical renunciation of the life to which he was born and in which he was bred: "He did not live his sober life as a form of penance, abstinence or simply Christian living but as a way of embracing the values and pleasures that can be satisfied and learnt only through poverty." (Martinelli, in Borg & Mayo, 2007, 112) And yet the earlier reference to the 'graduates' political parties' would once again suggest that Milani and the Barbiana students would recognise the limits of 'class suicide.' They seem to doubt whether people from wealthy families can, despite their allegiances and ethical commitment to the subaltern classes, break away from their 'habitus.'

Like most critical pedagogues, however, Milani, must have seen traditional educational institutions as bourgeois institutions and conventional teaching, marked by 'banking education', as serving to support the status quo through 'cultural invasion' and the 'cultural arbitrary' (Bourdieu) of the dominant social sectors. Repetition and ultimately exclusion was the case with the compulsory schooling of students from subaltern social strata in Italy during Milani's time.

The *Lettera* is written from Gianni's standpoint and in a tone of *anger* that results from the recognition of the school's 'symbolic violence' to reproduce class hierarchies. And yet, the *Lettera* shows that anger on its own does not lead to transformation. It can result in spontaneous outbursts and resistance (e.g. Willis' 'lads') which lead nowhere. It

requires careful guidance and collective channelling into what, for want of a better expression, can be called productive action.

The Barbiana School did not fail students (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, p. 80), failure having been identified by the *Lettera's* authors as the school authorities' weapon to separate the Giannis from the Pierinos. The authors regarded this as anti-constitutional (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, 61). Everyone was entitled, according to the Italian Constitution, to several years of education that were not to be spent repeating the same class. Repetition and ultimately exclusion was the case with the compulsory schooling of students from subaltern social strata

What is ostensibly a 'fair' public education system, intended to provide opportunities for all citizens, according to the terms of the Constitution, is in effect a subtle way of reproducing the class system on the basis of a contestable notion of 'meritocracy' (Borg *et al.*, 2009, 82).

This book was therefore written as a clarion call for parents to organise themselves in a process of participatory citizenship intended to democratise public institutions such as schools.

Disarmed. The poorer parents do nothing. They do not even imagine that these things happen. On the contrary, they feel moved. (Borg *et al.*, 2009, 55)

These schools are funded by the product of their own labours through taxes that many of them cannot evade, including such unfair consumption taxes as those imposed on basic necessities such as salt. What renders their situation ludicrous is the fact that they pay for the salaries of teachers (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, 68) who, instead of educating their children, act as judges who flunk them and push them out of the system.

The Tax System. The curious thing is that the stipend used to throw us out is paid by us, the excluded ones. (Borg *et al*, 2009, 86;).

In contrast to Gianni, we find Pierino, the doctor's son (Borg *et al*, 2009, 51), who enters school with a significant head-start, who finds the scholastic experience a natural extension to the home culture, who moves easily through the various grades and who "found himself in the *quinta* class at nine years of age" (Ibid, 69). Unlike Gianni, whose father "went to work at a blacksmiths when he was 12 years old..." (Ibid, 80), Pierino can afford to have less formal schooling since he can avail himself of the materially rewarding 'cultural capital' derived from home (Ibid, 48). For this reason, Milani helped develop a full time school at Barbiana, including weekends. Like Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), the *Lettera*'s authors state:

You say that Pierino, son of the doctor, writes correctly. Of course you say so, he speaks just like you do. He is part of the firm (Ibid, 42).

The text's authors demonstrated the school's social class bias through a national award winning piece of empirical research. (Gesualdi, S, 2007, 1X) They identified, through a survey, the professions of the fathers of those children who grow old in the elementary school. The survey showed that "By failing the older ones the teachers have also hit the poorest ones" (Borg *et al*, 2009, 71). In a memorable line, the authors compare the public school to a hospital that treats the healthy and rejects the sick (Ibid, 43).

In doing so, they denounce the teachers for their conditions of work. They allege that teachers work fewer hours than they ought to, and should, as a result, be denied the right to strike, although they suggest other forms of resistance and actions, to support the teachers' claims, that do not harm children, e.g. Gandhi-style non-violent resistance. The

authors argue that teachers spend the extra hours giving private tuition to the Pierinos who can pay for such a luxury, widening the gap between the Pierinos and the Giannis.

In the morning they are paid by us to teach all equally. In the afternoons, they take money from the richer ones in order to teach their young gentlemen differently. In June, at our expense, they preside at the tribunal and they judge the differences (Ibid, 82)

The old intermediate school sharpened class distinctions chiefly through its timetable and its terms – short hours of schooling and long holidays. The direct effect of these structures is a school “... cut to measure for the rich.” (Ibid, p. 20) Following Milani, the boys advocated the establishment, across Italy, of a provision of after-school-education (Borg *et al.*, 100).

For this reason, the School of Barbiana entailed long hours of study throughout the week, including weekends.

The worlds of ‘having’ and ‘being’

The school at Barbiana was a community school intended to belong to the world of ‘being’ rather than ‘having’. There is no method and there are no techniques involved in providing this alternative education. In his controversial *Esperienze Pastorali*, Milani claims that those who enquire about the secret of success at Barbiana ask the wrong question. They should be preoccupied with not what *one has to do to teach* but *how one should be* in order to teach. (Milani, 1996, 80).

Freire spoke about reinventing his political pedagogical approach and not trying to apply it cargo-cult style. Milani was adamant that the Barbiana experience would not be reproduced elsewhere. It was an experience related to place and context. It started at Barbiana and was to end at Barbiana. Milani had a free hand in that he was dealing with pupils already cast out of the system and who saw the time spent there as an alternative to

hard messy work in the fields (“school is always better than cow shit”). This is not the situation that obtains in a conventional public school system where teachers are constrained by a curriculum, syllabuses, time restrictions and other situations connected with increasingly corporate time. One has to reinvent the Barbiana approach within the ‘limit situations’ (Freire, 1970/1993) of the pedagogical setting.

Furthermore, the School of Barbiana related *education to life*, without remaining there. The *Lettera*’s authors argued for an education that had to be culturally relevant rather than alienating (see Martinelli in Borg & Mayo, 2007, 110)

We are told, in the *Lettera*, that:

Gianni did not know how to write the ‘to have’ verb. But he knew many things about the world of adults...

During the Gym exams the teacher threw a ball at us and said, “Play basketball.” We didn’t know how. The teacher looked at us with disdain: ‘Unfortunate children.’...He told the headmaster that we did not have ‘physical education’ and he wanted to make us do a re-sit in September.

We were all capable of climbing an oak tree. Once we’d be up there we wouldn’t hold on and we’d chop down a branch weighing a tonne with an axe. Then we’d drag it on the snow up to the doorstep of our home and put it at mother’s feet. (Borg *et al*, 2009, 52).

Foreign language teaching and acquisition constitutes one example of the manner in which Milani insisted on relating learning to life. He sent his pupils abroad to work in various cities and earn enough for their upkeep while they resided there; he secured funds for the Barbiana students to cover their travel expenses. This was intended for them not simply to cross borders and broaden their horizons but also to learn foreign languages as spoken by the native speakers. In public schools, working and peasant class students often failed tests, the contents of which had no bearing on the kind of life lived within and outside their region. The *Lettera* authors say, the French learnt by Pierino, which

enabled him to pass the state exam, would not allow him to find the way to the toilet in France (Ibid. 45).

The question of knowledge

As with Freire, the starting point is always that of human beings “in the ‘here and now’ (Freire, 1970, 1993, 85). Likewise Milani used events or developments within the community that captured the students’ imagination and used them as motivating factors for lessons. They constituted the ‘occasional motive’. Martinelli (2007) discloses that, when he entered the classroom at Barbiana, he saw Don Milani and the rest of the class analyse skeletons in what was an anatomy lesson.

The immediate motive, the key point of departure for his pedagogical activity, was provided by the fact that the floor of the society, which stood adjacent to the church, caved in. Bones were discovered as a result. The more profound and long term motive, as he explained in the letter to the Judges, with reference to his pedagogical practice, was to avail himself of this particular event to capture the pupils’ interest and thus gradually lead them, once they had become so motivated, to tackle the core areas of the disciplines. A few bones were sufficient to enable one to learn how to use vocabulary and texts dealing with anatomy and physiology.(Martinelli in Borg & Mayo, 2007,110)

In remaining there and not moving beyond, one would be engaging in “basismo” (a form of populism), as they would say in Latin America. (Freire, 1994) In watering down curricula on the pretext that it renders them closer to life, one is again shortchanging students, denying them mastery of certain areas which prove crucial in terms of economic and political success.

Young and Muller (2010) argue along similar lines. They critique different forms of progressive discourses on education for providing what can be a watered down version of education. They advocate a future curriculum scenario (Young and Muller, 2010, 16) that is flexible in widening and traversing boundaries. This curriculum however also

retains some sharp contours around key disciplines (profound motive) recognized as ‘powerful knowledge’. Young and Muller argue that “access to powerful knowledge is a right for all not just the few” (Young and Muller, 2010, 24)

More specifically, they provide an argument for a future curriculum scenario, called Future 3 (Future 1 is characterized by strong classification, in Bernstein’s sense, and bold disciplinary boundaries, while Future 2 is characterized by weaker classification and hybridization). Future 3 is characterized by “Boundary maintenance as prior to boundary crossing”. (Young and Muller, 2010, 16) This scenario allows for some flexibility in the broadening of and crossing boundaries but retains some fixed ones around key disciplines that constitute ‘powerful knowledge’. I would argue that this would be in keeping with the Milani approach. The point to register regarding Milani’s approach is that remaining at the level of the ‘occasional/immediate motive’ (no matter how stimulating and ‘true to life’ this can be) can lead to superficiality and denial of access to the kind of knowledge that really matters in the real world. One therefore needs to take the major step into venturing towards the ‘profound motive.’ The ‘occasional motive’ is just a conduit that gradually takes the learners into the heart of those disciplines containing knowledge that is really useful in the outside world. This is what justifies the effort of attending a school, no matter how unorthodox it is in its over-all approach (e.g. the Barbiana school), rather than simply learning from life itself. It is the school which educates in the sense suggested by the Barbiana experience. It is intended to take learners to that higher level and not simply confine them to the drift of life. In short, moving from the ‘occasional’ to the ‘profound’ motive is the means to “take...students beyond their experience and enable them to envisage alternatives that

have some basis in the real world?’(Young, 2013, 107). Anatomy, Physiology, History and writing skills in the native language constituted some of the knowledge regarded as powerful enough in Italian society and beyond to require in depth mastery at the Barbiana school. As for language, this acquisition of the knowledge and style involved was to occur alongside the learning of other languages which perhaps required less rigorous application. ‘Better to learn many languages badly than simply one well’ – this was Milani’s dictum (Fallaci, 1993, 361-362; Batini *et al*, 2003, 36) which, of course is not to be taken literally. He was adamant in advocating the proper learning of one or two languages and acquiring a more rudimentary knowledge of other languages where the focus, in the latter case, is mainly on widespread communication with people from different countries or contexts rather than on idiomatic and grammatical correctness.

To avoid mortgaging the child’s future

The students had to move from that stimulating but still basic level (the occasional motive level) to a non-specialised curriculum, not to mortgage the child’s future.

If he has a passion for a subject one should forbid him to study it. Tell him that he is limiting himself or that he will not be rounded out. There’s lots of time later to close oneself in specialisation. (Borg *et al*,2009, 98)

Like Buber, Freire and other critical educators, Milani believed in dialogical exchange and the Friday conference at San Donato provided an excellent example. Workers and peasants prepared the material beforehand to avoid being ostensibly ‘passive’ listeners. They were encouraged to engage the speaker and Milani often pulled up the speaker for a lack of adequate preparation and communication (Milani, 1970, 37).

Milani practically formalised the students-teachers role at Barbiana for logistical and pedagogical reasons. He introduced peer tutoring realising that pupils often learn better from their own peers with whom they share the same social class and broader cultural background and therefore language. It has been argued that one enhances one's learning by communicating what is learnt to others. At the Barbiana school, those who did not keep track were helped to learn by their peers who, in turn, enhanced their own understanding of what was learnt through the effort involved in conveying it to others. It confirms an approach advocated and used by many others including Maria Montessori and variations of which can be traced as far back as the 'monitorial system' adopted by John Lancaster in 18th century England.

In a school which adopted the motto 'I Care' (Milani, 1988b, p. 56), the students engaged in a pedagogical experience in which they were both teachers and learners. Milani himself tutored the first group of students. As students increased in number – there were around forty students in one particular summer – he adopted peer tutoring as a key pedagogical tool. This pedagogical approach allows for the emergence of what Lev Vygotsky would call 'zones of proximal development.'

There was only one copy of each book. The boys used to crowd around it. It was hard to notice that one was a bit older and was teaching. (Borg *et al*, 2009, 36)

Older students could spend a whole morning teaching their younger counterparts.

The following year I was a teacher. That is, I was a teacher for three half-days a week. I taught Geography, Mathematics and French to the *prima media* class (Borg *et al*, 2009, 37)

This must have served as a tremendous source of motivation for the students, once degraded and therefore demoralised by the public schools, to now be 'elevated' to the

status of and esteemed as teachers. It is hardly surprising that they would prefer these experiences to the messy ones encountered in the fields (Ibid, 36). Furthermore, it also brings to mind a measure I have seen adopted in adult education centres to confront the stigma of literacy classes in small communities; the literacy learners also teach a skill in which they are proficient (e.g. catering, embroidery) and the literacy educators take courses at the centre in say computing, all being learners and teachers at the same time.

An authentic dialogical approach necessitates the sharpening of listening and observation skills. In *Esperienze Pastorali* (Milani, 1997), Milani states that he owes everything he knows to the workers and peasants with whom he carried out schooling. He states that it is he who learnt from them that which they believed to have learnt from him, and asserts that he only taught them to express themselves while they have taught him to live and that it was they who led him to think those thoughts that are expressed in the book. (paraphrased from Milani, 1996, 76).

Milani also believed in a directive form of education. Allowing his students to indulge in the alternative *laissez faire* pedagogy would have been a case of utter irresponsibility on Milani's part, given the age of the students at Barbiana and Milani's concern for their future in a society where knowledge is power. Teachers would do well to heed this before lapsing into 'romanticised' versions of 'child-centred' learning. Milani, however, believed in the older students' autonomy. When he left San Donato and took up residence at Barbiana, the Friday conference continued to be carried out by the youths of San Donato. He assisted them from afar by establishing contact with potential speakers (Milani, 1970, 147-148).

The emphasis on exchange of views and learning from each other in the learning settings, which Milani helped create together with community members (at San Donato) and his students (at Barbiana), throws into sharp relief the *collective* dimensions of

knowledge. This approach remains relevant in an age when we are bombarded with such phrases as ‘self-directed learning’, ‘individualised modules’ and the ideology of competitive individualism. Not only did pupils ‘care’ but their caring also took the form of a collective pedagogical experience in which they were both teachers and learners.

Furthermore, the afternoon lesson at Barbiana centred on the facts of the day as reported by the local newspaper. Here the newspaper constituted a very important teaching resource, as at San Donato di Calenzano (Simeone, 1996, 105). This lesson combined knowledge of current affairs with the teaching of such skills as *critical literacy*. This represents an attempt to read the world through a critical engagement with this world’s *construction* via the media.

I also knew well the historical period in which I lived. That is the newspaper that, at Barbiana, we read every day, aloud, from top to bottom (Borg *et al*, 2009, 49).

Current events and controversies were followed carefully, articles were engaged with collectively, their underlying ideological positions were identified and unveiled. This exercise in critical literacy often provoked *collective* responses by the students under their mentor’s guidance (Borg and Mayo, 2006). The same applied to the ‘Letter to the Judges’ in which Milani constantly refers to discussions with his students on the issues raised, including historical issues (Scuola di Barbiana, 1996, 123). The Barbiana pupils not only *read* but also *wrote* the world and did so *collectively* and *critically* (Taylor, 1993).

In keeping with the ‘I Care’ motto, the class did not proceed to the next stage in the learning process until each and every pupil mastered the last one. Rather than fail pupils, the school gave priority to the child who fell backward.:

However, whoever lacked the basics, who was slow or unmotivated, felt that he was the favourite one. He was welcomed just as you'd welcome the first in class. It seemed as if the school existed solely for him. Until he understood, the others did not move ahead. (Borg *et al*, 2009, 36).

The authors warned against tracking practices as suggested by a member of the Christian-Democratic party, who, in a speech in parliament, unabashedly argued that: “Why on earth should those who are intellectually gifted and motivated be humiliated in a school where it is necessary to clip their wings, in order to keep them at the flight level of those who by nature must necessarily proceed slowly?” (Borg *et al*, 2009, 88). Being true to the message of the Gospels, an important source of reading at the Barbiana School, Milani and his students opted for an education in which, once again, one learns not to have but to be and be for others. This attests to Milani's belief in ethics being ‘powerful knowledge,’ as mentioned by Young (2013, 108) who draws on Kant's urging of people to ‘treat everyone as an end in themselves and not as a means to your ends’.

This standpoint adds credibility and forcefulness to the arguments developed throughout the *Lettera*. Certainly teachers play an important role in providing a social justice education predicated on an option for the poor and less privileged members of society. Teachers are not the only important players here but nevertheless their role remains crucial.

While Freire provides edifying images of teachers, whose conditions he sought to improve when Education Secretary in São Paulo, one comes across a different image of teachers in the *Lettera*. These are persons who flunk students, assessing them on skills they did not enable the students to acquire. The authors humorously point to the teacher's inane assertion that writers are born and not made, to which they retort: “But in

the meantime you earn your salary as *a teacher of Italian.*” (Borg *et al*, 2009,137). In fact the students indicate that writing is an art which needs to be learnt. The *Lettera* provides insights into the systematic way through which students engage in collective writing, which drew interest from different parts of the region.(Corradi, 2012, 13-16) The students at Barbiana were encouraged to place all their random ideas on sheets of papers from which a systematic ordering and sifting through occurred by means of collective discussion until some key non repetitive ideas remained. This allowed for a coherent piece of writing. They eliminated superfluous words, redundancies, overly long sentences and were careful not to have more than one concept in a single sentence. (Borg *et al*, 2009, 139)

Lessons from Lorenzo Milani and the San Donato/Barbiana Experiences

The School of Barbiana experience provides an alternative form of schooling from which teachers in the public school system can learn. Much depends on the attitude that the teachers develop, as indicated by Milani when stating that it is more a question of how one must be, rather than what one must do. Teachers can provide such an alternative education by: calling for and engaging in an ‘after school’ programme which is provided to everyone and not just those who can pay for it; encouraging peer tutoring; enabling students to learn collectively and ‘to be’ for themselves and for others; relating education to life; starting with the ‘here and now’ and moving beyond to *higher order* thinking; engaging *with* learners in a critical reading of the world as manifest in its day to day reality but also through its construction via the media; calling for an inclusive curriculum relevant to the different pupils and a school which does not fail students and push them

out but ensures that the constitutional right of everyone to enjoy a number of years of public schooling (that does not involve repetition) is respected and safeguarded.

The fact that some pupils from the Barbiana experience ended up as teachers indicates that they had faith in the emergence of a type of teacher who was different from the one the *Lettera* portrays in a negative light. They had faith in teachers concerned with social justice and whose mission is to improve opportunities and experiences for those who have traditionally suffered in a socially differentiated system. The School of Barbiana sought to inspire this type of teacher. And the verb ‘calling for’ in the list of qualities just provided indicates that many of the challenges cannot be faced by teachers on their own. As many critical pedagogues would argue, they can only be faced by teachers within a movement or alliance of movements, involving people from other walks of life, including the parents called upon in the *Lettera* to organise themselves, clamouring for reforms in the state school system. These are the sort of reforms that would help revitalise an important sector of the public sphere.

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Notes

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² I am indebted to my good friend Professor Roger Dale for this information. On this issue, see Dale (2013, forthcoming).

³ The biographical account is summarised from information provided by Fallaci (1993), Pecorini (1998) and the Centro Formazione e Ricerca Don Milani, e Scuola di Barbiana, <http://www.barbiana.it/biografia.html>. Accessed 17 March, 2007. See also <http://www.icareancora.it/> Accessed 24th March 2007.

⁴ My translation from the original in Italian. <http://www.chille.it/progetti-in-corso/progetto-don-milani-lettera-a-una-professoressa/> Accessed 5th January 2013.