Social Class, Language and Power

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'Letter to a Teacher': Lorenzo Milani and the School of Barbiana

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PREFACE

This volume is the result of the collaboration between the authors and a number of colleagues, researchers and scholars who have been touched byDon Lorenzo Milani's contributions to education and society. The first result of this endeavour was published in 2009, in the form of a volume entitled 'Letter to a Teacher. Lorenzo Milani's contribution to critical citizenship' (Malta: Agenda). The interest created by this volume encouraged us to further our research and to extend our collaboration with other colleagues, who commented our work and with whom we engaged critically in order to produce this new volume. In it we retain the translated version of Don Milani's*LetteraadunaProfessoressa*, including footnotes and notes, which appeared originally in our 2009 publication. These, however, have been revised and corrections have also been affected. The other original contributions highlight the importance of Don Milani's work, the relevance of its powerful message in today's society and his use of language as a means to transmit his enlightening philosophy.

We would like to thank all the colleagues and students whose comments, reactions and criticism inspired us to carry further research on Don Lorenzo Milani's works. We also thank all those who provided feedback on different drafts of this book, Antoinette Pace for proofreading the final draft, Raphael Vella for his contribution to the cover design and Joe Cassar for his editorial support.

Carmel Borg, Mario Cardona, Sandro Caruana

FOREWORD

DON MILANI, THE SCHOOL OF BARBIANA AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

This book foregrounds the ideas of an important European pedagogue whose writings provide insights for a critical social justice oriented approach to education. He has all the credentials to be regarded as potentially a key source of inspiration for critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is that movement which is very much inspired by the work of Paulo Freire and others but which has had its origins in North America. One need only visit the site of the Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy at McGill University to verify this as we come across such names as those of Henry Giroux, Stanley Aronowitz, Michael Apple, Deborah Britzman, bell hooks, Donaldo Macedo, Peter McLaren, Ira Shor, Antonia Darder and Shirley Steinberg, among the leading figures[1] (I would include Maxine Greene and Roger I. Simon among the major North American exponents). Among the historical figures that include John Dewey, Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, Lev Vygotsky, W.E.B. Du Bois and more recently Jesus 'Pato' Gomez[2] and Joe Kincheloe, one should also add Don Lorenzo Milani. In this regard, Milani joins other important figures from Italy who provide insights for a critical pedagogical approach to knowledge, learning and action. These include Danilo Dolci, who wedded community learning and social action, through community mobilization, 'reverse strikes' and 'hunger strikes' (Castiglione, 2004), and Aldo Capitini, the anti-fascist peace educator and activist who organized various educational and mobilizing activities within the context of a peace education movement and his post-war centres for social orientation (COS) (Associazione Amici di Aldo Capitini, undated). Capitini was a visitor at Milani's school at Barbiana.

Milani's approach to education for social justice gives importance to a number of issues, notably social class issues, race issues especially with his critique of North-South relations and cultural/technological transfer, the collective dimension of learning and action (emphasis is placed on reading and writing the word and the world collectively), student-teachers and teacher-students (a remarkable form of peer tutoring) reading and responding critically to the media (newspapers), the existential basis of one's learning (from the occasional to the profound motive) and the fusion of academic and technical knowledge. The list is by no means exhaustive.

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1 See the Paulo and Nita Freire International project for Critical pedagogy website: http://freire.education.mcgill.ca/content/important-figures-emergence-critical-pedagogy Accessed 2nd July 2008.

2 Ibid.

There is also an anti-war pedagogy that emerges from his defence of the right to 'conscientious objection' with its process of reading/teaching history against the grain. The last feature of Milani's pedagogical approach would be very apt for critical pedagogues engaged in exploring signposts for a pedagogical politics after Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib (Giroux, 2005) and for a pedagogy against empire (McLaren and Jaramillo, 2007).

Being quite eclectic like Freire and sharing with the Brazilian educator the influence of the Holy Gospels, Lorenzo Milani differs with respect to Marxism. And yet Gramsci's writings, an important influence on critical pedagogy, were of interest to Milani. The Italian Marxist's *Letters from Prison* were important reading material at the School of Barbiana. However one does not come across traces of Marxism or references to Marx in the writings of the Tuscan priest. The Gospels were the most important source of inspiration for Milani. This notwithstanding, his classes at San Donato, the place where he served prior to Barbiana, were devoid of religious symbols – a secular, non- denominational school (Simeone, 1996, p. 99).

Despite the absence of Marxist influences in Milani's works, it is interesting to note that what he wrote in *Esperienze Pastorali* and that which the eight boys wrote in the *Lettera*[3] anticipate or echo the arguments of French sociologists and philosophers and English and American sociologists, a number of whom of neo-Marxist orientation, with regard to the themes of the bourgeois school and its role in social reproduction. Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas, Raymond Boudon, Christian Baudelot and Roger Establet, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, Jean Anyon, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron come to mind. In this regard, one should underline the convergence of the ideas expressed in the *Lettera* and the ideas concerning the school and bourgeois cultural capital expressed by the leading French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (certainly not a Marxist). It seems that Milani, a keen reader of French literature, had been exposed to the critique of bourgeois culture and power that occurred in France and that certainly influenced Bourdieu.

Like all human beings, Milani has his contradictions, as one can observe from the interviews reproduced by his helpers, students and colleagues in this book. One must also keep in mind the time when his writings emerged. However, there is much in the work of Milani and his students to provide the basis for a process of schooling that serves as an antidote to the prevailing contemporary system, a system which gives pride of place to testing, standardization, league tables, vouchers. When the *Lettera* was published in 1967, it provided an important source of inspiration for the movement for change known as the *68* Movement and was heralded by the leading Italian intellectual, Pier Paolo Pasolini, as one of the few books that had aroused his enthusiasm at the time. The text underlines, as this translation will show, the social class basis of school failure and does so with much clarity as it contrasts the fortunes

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[3] *Letter to a Teacher* is a collective piece of work authored by the eight students of Barbiana under his direction.

and everyday worlds of Pierino and Gianni. Its vignettes from peasant/working class and middle class lives, centering around Pierino and Gianni, serve to render the arguments made most compelling.

It goes beyond this. For, in projecting an alternative vision for schooling, it draws on the experiences that took place at Barbiana, experiences which, as Freire would argue, almost echoing Milani on this, cannot be transplanted but must be reinvented. In Don Milani's view, the experience at Barbiana started at Barbiana and ended at Barbiana. This is not to say that critical pedagogues cannot glean ideas from the Barbiana experience, as presented in this book, to contribute to a more humane, more social justice oriented education predicated on rigour, love, collective work and vivid imagination, and which eschews a process of programming for failure.

Peter Mayo

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INTRODUCTION

Taking as its point of departure the moral conviction that education is inherently political (Mayo, 1999; Mayo, 2004; Borg & Mayo, 2006; Borg & Cardona, 2008; Borg, Cardona & Caruana, 2009; Borg, 2010; Borg, 2013) this book highlights the educational legacy of Don Lorenzo Milani (1923-1967) and the students who attended his school in Barbiana, an isolated community in the Mugello region of Tuscany. *Lettera a una professoressa* ('Letter to a Teacher') is the key text that defines the Barbiana phase in Milani's life. Written under his close editorial supervision, the book is recognised as the work of eight boys from the school. Forty-seven years from its publication, the *Lettera*, translated into several languages, continues to inspire academics, educationalists, students and social activists who have embraced social justice as their vision for education (Gesualdi, 2007; Hoffman, 2007; Martinelli, 2007).

Born in May 1923, Lorenzo Milani Comparetti was meant to reproduce the prestigeous history of his extended family – the Comparetti-Milani-Weiss families. Domenico Comparetti, a well known 19th century philosopher, was proficient in 19 languages. He was studying another language – Arabic – when he died at age 88. Domenico's wife, Elena Raffalovich was a life-time collaborator of Friedrich Froebel (Martinelli, 2007). Luigi, Lorenzo's grandfather, was an accomplished archaeologist. Born in Trieste, a cosmopolitan city under Austrian rule, Lorenzo's mother, Alice Weiss, was not a university graduate. However, her sophistication and cultural capital were admired by a wide circle of friends. Alice's cousin, Edoardo Weiss was a student of Freud; he established the psychoanalytic school in Italy and was a personal friend of James Joyce, the Irish writer who for some time taught at the Berlitz School in Trieste where Alice had taken some courses (Borghini, 2004). Proficient in six languages, Albano, Milani's father, was a chemistry professor with vast interests in literature.

As a child, Milani's upbringing was cushioned by privilege, comfort, intellectual stimulation and bourgeois 'distinction' (Bourdieu, 1984). His immediate social context was serviced by maids, a cook, a driver, a private tutor and a wet nurse. The presence of learned relatives, friends and collections of artistic and archaeological artifacts defined the cosmopolitan milieu of his home (Fallaci, 2005). At home, Lorenzo, like his brother and sister, was not simply a child to be seen but not heard. On the contrary, he was central to what was happening within the family. Roberto Dessales, a school friend of Adriano, Lorenzo's brother, recalls how the father would recite poems in Latin and listen to classical music with his children and their friends (Fallaci, 2005). No wonder Lorenzo possessed a weltannschaung that was transnational in nature and a linguistic repertoire that included German, Italian, English, French, Spanish, Latin, Hebrew and Ancient Greek (Becchi, 2004).

The Milani family belonged to the rentier class (Borg and Mayo, 2006, 2008), a socio-economic location that was only partially challenged at a time when Italy, like the rest of the world, was facing an economic depression. In fact, early in the 1930s, Albano moved his family from Firenze to Milan with the aim of supplementing his family's income. In Milan, Lorenzo's father took up a managerial position while maintainig an estate of twenty-five farms at Gigliola in Montespertoli and a summer residence at Castiglioncello. The family's addresses in Milan – 15, Via Conservatorio, followed by 26, Via Fiamma – and the class register of the *Emilio Castiglione* elementary school, which classified Lorenzo's family as rich, attest to the fact that while the family's economic status was partially dented, it continued to enjoy a high standard of living even when economic depression had raised its ugly head.

In Milan, Lorenzo experienced a schooling process that, to his mind, served to socialise students into assimilating a diet of fascist ideology. Lorenzo revisited his schooling years in *Lettera ai giudici*, a document written towards the end of his life, in response to the accusation of incitement to the crime of desertion and military disobedience. In *Lettera ai giudici* he accused his former teachers of acting as organic intellectuals to the fascist bloc by legitimising 'common sense' (read fascist) knowledge within schools.

Lorenzo's antipathy towards the school's socialisation process, the fact that his social class position brought him in direct contact with social, cultural and economic privilege and dominance, his close contact with poverty on the streets of Firenze and Milan, coupled with an early understanding of the social injustice that characterised the society in which he lived, constituted the beginning of a journey that led to his preferential option for the poor and to his pacifist stance.

Early in his life, Milani developed a reputation for being an anti-conformist, a quasi-bohemian who lived on the edge of what was perceived as socially acceptable (Braccini and Taddei, 1999). His genuine conversion to Catholicism represents one of his major acts of 'rebellion'. Born into an agnostic family with a mother of Jewish descent, Lorenzo was baptised, following his parents' remarrying within the Catholic Church. All happened on the same day - 29th June, 1933 – in the shadow of Hitler's rise to power. It was a Catholic marriage of convenience, choreographed by Don Vincenzo Viviani, a friend of the Milani family from the parish of *San Pietro in Mercato*. This marriage was meant to shield the family from the anti-semitic hysteria that characterised the years leading to World War II. According to one of Milani's biographers (Fallaci, 2005), the decision by Alicia and Albano to baptise their three children was also taken in response to Adriano's, Lorenzo's brother, traumatic experience in a Catholic private school. Adriano was constantly being bullied by the teacher of Religion and by his peers for being a "heretic" (sic).

It seems that Lorenzo's baptism at age 10 constituted his awakening to the fact that his mother had Jewish roots. In a review of *Lettere alla mamma*, originally published in *Il Tempo*, in 1973, Pier Paolo Pasolini, the Italian film director, suggested that Lorenzo was psychologically and culturally Jewish (Braccini and Taddei, 1999). Don Bensi, Milani's spiritual director, argued that Lorenzo "was a

Christian, but also a Jew: he always kept a foot, albeit in his own way, in the Old Testament. This explains his rigour, his outbursts, and his frightening intransigence" (in Braccini and Taddei, 1999, p. 11). As with Catholicism, there is nothing in Milani's biography to suggest that Alicia was interested in transmitting her Jewish cultural heritage to her children (Borg and Cardona, 2008). Elena Milani Comparetti (1999), Lorenzo's sister, confirms that, as children, they were never exposed to a Jewish education process or value system. This fact was confirmed by Alicia herself, in an interview with Nazzareno Fabbretti (in Martinelli, 2007). The rigour that defined Milani's pedagogical and pastoral stance was intellectual (Braccini and Taddei, 1999) and deeply spiritual, while his intransigence and arrogance could be attributed to his bourgeois upbringing. Milani's subjectivity stemmed from his sociological analysis of the immediate, national and international, socio-economic realities, and from his unconditional Christian love.

The root causes of Milani's transformation from a potential bourgeois and secular intellectual to a Catholic priest committed to the oppressed, remain largely a mystery. Milani's biographers (Fallaci, 2005, Pecorini, 1998) point at two possible indicators, including Lorenzo's decision, contrary to his parents' expectations, to study Art, following his completion of the compulsory years of schooling in 1941. On the advice of Giorgio Pasquali from Florence, his father engaged the services of Hans Joachim Staude, an established German artist known for his profound spirituality. Lorenzo's dialogues with Staude over Sacred Art seems to have initiated Milani into a deeply spiritual experience. Moreover, Lorenzo's chance discovery, in the summer of 1942, of an old missal, in a desecrated chapel on the family's estate of Gigliola, is often mentioned as another possible catalyst to his real conversion to Catholicism.

In 1943, Lorenzo received the sacrament of confirmation from Cardinal Elia Della Costa. Lorenzo's parents were not informed and were shocked when, within months of his confirmation, on the 9th of November, at the age of twenty, he entered the seminary at Castello in Oltrarno. Lorenzo was ordained priest four years later, on the 13th of July, 1947, at the age of 24.

The radical attitude that defined his years at the seminary constituted the prelude to a pastoral life that was characteristed by an obsession with coherence and by a total commitment to a liberatory vision and project. Close to his ordination, Lorenzo renounced his family's inheritance, a deeply symbolic gesture of how he wanted to live his pastoral years.

Milani's twenty years of pastoral leadership unfolded against a socio-political backdrop marked by Pious XII's crusade against communism; a crusade that was partially responsible for the polarisation of Italian society. Milani refused to foreground anti-communism in his pastoral work. He considered communists as children of an equal God. As a priest, Milani felt morally obliged to reach out to all, irrespective of one's ideological background.

The Diocese of Florence, Milani's immediate pastoral patch, was first led by Cardinal Elia della Costa, an anti-fascist, and then by Cardinal Ermenegildo Florit,

who played an important role, together with other religious leaders, in isolating Don Milani. At the time of Lorenzo's most radical decisions, Florence was rich in projects that addressed peace and social justice. Some of these projects were led by radical Catholics such as Don Primo Mazzolari, Giorgio La Pira, Don Bruno Borghi, Ernesto Balducci, and others from the circle of *Testimonianze*, a well established Catholic periodical. Aldo Capitini, whose reflections and action were inspired by the philosophy of passive resistence of Mahatma Gandhi, was also highly influential within Catholic circles in Tuscany (Schettini, 2008).

Milani's pastoral journey started at the parish of San Donato di Calenzano, a small community near Prato, fifteen kilometres away from Florence. It was populated by farmers and textile workers and led spiritually by an old provost, don Pugi. As witnessed in his book *Esperienze Pastorali*, published in 1958, the parishoners' spirituality was essentially folkloristic in nature. Their way of experiencing religion contrasted heavily with Don Milani's radical reading of the Word.

Milani's pastoral life at San Donato mirrored the principles that informed his entire pastoral journey – i) coherence between action, reflection and spirituality (Schettini, 2008); ii) dominance of moral law over predominace of power; and iii) a life dedicated to others, particularly those who were living in poverty (Fiorani, 1999). In the spirit of what today one would refer to as radical or emancipatory community development, Milani immersed himself totally within the community. He did not wait for the community to approach him. In the morning, after Mass, he would walk through the village to phone, collect the post or buy the newspaper. On the road, he would encounter the 'generative themes' (Freire, 1970, 1971) that defined San Donato. Unemployment, exploitation of child labour and the crisis in accommodation constituted some of the chronic ethical, moral and political problems of Milani's first pastoral community.

San Donato's cultural landscape was mainly defined by high levels of illiteracy and by what Milani considered as low levels of analysis, weak organisation of ideas and poor communication skills. Shyness was also understood by Milani as a major impediment to the community's emancipation. Against such a backdrop, Milani's educational project at San Donato, which consisted of a *scuola serale* (evening school), the *Conferenza del venerdì* (Friday conference) and drama sessions at the headquarters of the Compagnia del S.S. Sacramento, an old confraternity of San Donato, was meant to reclaim the community members' humanity by engaging in a process of 'locating and dislocating oppression' (Freire, 1973, Ledwith, 2005).

Milani's educational vision was not secular. He wanted to set up the school at San Donato primarily to overcome the linguistic barrier that limited his conversation with the parishoners on matters inspired by the Gospels (Bruni, 1974). The *scuola popolare* formed part of his strategy to evangelise and to reach out to the lost sheep (Schettini, 2008). The main motivation for his action was profoundly religious (Simeone, 1996).

True to Milani's inclusiveness, the educational context of San Donato was non-denominational in nature. Milani rejected the confessional school. For Milani, school

constituted a space for genuine dialogue and for active engagement with issues that were profound, relevant, immediate and potentially transformative in nature. Milani argued that the search for truth and genuine dialogue were not possible within a school climate that was partisan and exclusive.

Language was central to Milani's pedagogy of freedom. He understood that one cannot read the 'world' without mastering the 'word' (Freire, 1995). Milani referred to language as the 'ghostly key' that opens every door, including the door of sovereignty. For Milani, proficiency in the language of power is intimately tied to the struggle for democracy, equity and social justice.

According to three of his students from San Donato – Mario Rosi, Ferruccio Francioni and Benito Ferrini – Don Milani would explain a word in detail: its provenance; how it can be used in different circumstances; its shades of meaning; how it translates in different languages; and other words that derive from it (Fallaci, 2005).

In a letter to Enrico Barnebei, Director of the Italian newspaper *Giornale del Mattino*, Milani explains that:

> In the first years the young men were not interested in this work because they did not appreciate its functionality. However, with time, they started to enjoy it (in Braccini and Taddei, 1999, p. 38)

Apart from speaking well, Milani expected students to write equally well. In current terms, Milani's students at San Donato and, later, at Barbiana, engaged in emancipatory action research. The students were the subjects and protagonists in the process of research and writing. Blending archival research with direct, experiential knowledge, the writing phase served to collectively bond them with the contents of their analysis. In the true spirit of social theology, the ultimate goal of the writing was to help the community transform the conditions that facilitate material as well as cultural domination. As a result, the writing had to be kept simple and sieved of any flowery language that tends to colonise rather than emancipate the reader.

Given Milani's radical stance on many issues, the absence of females from two of the three official educational spaces created or led by Milani at San Donato – the *scuola serale* and the *conferenza del venerdì* – could not be overlooked or dismissed as an inevitable detail accruing from a particular historical moment. The all-male situation obtained in the aforementioned sites may be traced to Don Pugi's conservativeness and to the prevailing mentality, accentuated in rural areas, that late evenings are too dangerous for women to stay out, and that women, unlike men, could do with little education. The suggestion that Milani targeted men because, unlike women, they were increasingly distancing themselves from the Church and because Milani's personality, characterised by frequent outbursts, was more compatible with an all-men context (Braccini and Taddei, 1999), seems too speculative to explain his lack of action in this regard. At San Donato, Milani partially redeemed himself in this area by allowing females to interact with males during the drama sessions.

Milani's radical pastoral approach at San Donato disturbed the comfort zone of a number of parishioners, ecclesiastics in the vicinity and the ecclesiastical authorities in Florence. While the practice of priests manning the coffee bar or selling pigs and wine seems to have been tolerated (Milani in Martinelli, 2007), Milani's radical option for the poor, his readiness to problematise, question and challenge established practices, his aggressiveness towards speakers who he considered as ill prepared and, therefore, disrespectful of the community, his willingness to venture into hazardous territories, his openness to all, irrespective of political allegiances, his controversial sermons, some of which included references to upcoming elections and twice, in 1951 and 1953, provided clear indications of his voting preferences, his open antipathy towards *Azione Cattolica* (Catholic Action), his critique of parish priests in the area and of communists for their alienating practices, rendered his transfer to another community a foregone conclusion.

On 6 December 1954, soon after Don Pugi's death, and seven years into his priesthood, Don Milani arrived at his new parish – *Sant'Andrea a Barbiana*. Situated in the hills of the Mugello region, Barbiana was a hamlet of about twenty farmhouses. The hamlet lacked most of the basic services, including an access road, water, and electricity which was introduced in 1965, two years before Milani's death.

Typical of settlements located in mountainous regions, Barbiana was populated by families with very young children. Families moved down to the plains as soon as their children reached fourteen years, the work-permit age. The educational life of children born at Barbiana followed a definite script – they would come out of the *quinta elementare* semi-literate, timid and with poor self-esteem. In fact, most of the children who would later attend his school would "have either failed their exams and left school or were bitterly discouraged with the way they were taught" (Rossi and Cole, 1970, p. 10).

While subsistence farming, conditioned by a thin layer of very poor soil, characterised the economy of the Barbiana peasants, life for the industrial workers was equally hard. The day for the latter category of workers started at five in the morning. They would walk seven kilometres to the train station and would spend an hour-and-a-half on the train to Florence. They would normally return home at half-past-eight in the evening.

While 'exile' was meant to silence and isolate Milani, the Barbiana phase proved to be the most productive, radical, public and controversial of the two pastoral experiences. This phase was characterised by his total dedication to an educational project – the school of Barbiana - that served students, ranging in age from eleven to eighteen, twelve hours a day, seven days a week, public holidays included.

The school was established a few days after Milani's arrival (Bozzolini, 2011). It did not belong to the state school system. In fact, it was described as private, meaning that it did not receive financial support from the state. Milani did not charge fees.

The physical space of the school consisted of four rooms - two rooms within the priory and two workshops dedicated to wood and metal work respectively. The immediate grounds of the priory were conceived of as an extension to the school

premises. In fact, they were used extensively during Spring and Summer, from April to October.

School resources were limited. Some of them were manufactured by Milani and the students themselves. Such was the case with the in-house production and projection of a microfilm based on Beethoven's seventh symphony, the manufacturing of an instrument that photographed, in black and white, the different phases of the eclipse of the sun, and the construction of a teodolite that measured the distance between the belfry of San Martino and the station of Vicchio (Martinelli, 2007). Milani also drew from his family resources.

Only a few of the students belonged to the parish of Barbiana. Some of the non-parishoners lived with families at Barbiana. Others came from nearby parishes and returned home every day. According to Martinelli (2007), save for five students, most of them attended Milani's school enthusiastically. Some opted for school when faced with choosing between school and work.

Milani's school at Barbiana started as a *scuola serale,* a multi-age class taught by one teacher. This initiative was meant to support the elementary school of Padulivo, a cluster of houses, one kilometre from the Church. Later, Milani established a full-time 'professional' school for students wanting to continue beyond the *quinta elementare.* Milani's school saved the children from going to Borgo San Lorenzo for secondary education, and, as indicated earlier, postponed the movement to the plains of some of the families (*).

Kleindeinst (1994) provides us with video footage of life at the school of Barbiana. Hoffmann (2007) describes some of the scenes from the documentary as follows:

The boys trudging up the steep, forbidding hill, bundled against the region's rain and cold. We see them gathered around long tables in the presbytery during the winter months, the older boys instructing the younger children. In spring and summer they move the tables outside under those cypresses, where they write, tinker with an astrolabe that they will use to study the night time sky, or sit listening attentively to one of the many fascinating visitors whom Father Milani has invited to make the outside world a reality to children living in what was then a remote corner of Tuscany (p. 5).

Students who wrote the *Lettera* confirm that there was no break. Save for swimming and skiing, tolerated for their functionality, there was little space for leisure persuits within the school curriculum. Leisure, according to Milani, ruined the life chances of working-class youth (Milani in Gesualdi, 2007).

Given the fact that the formal education system had shortchanged most of his students, Milani acted with a sense of urgency. The school at Barbiana had to quickly equip students with relevant skills while preparing them for the formal exams imposed by the official system. It was a parallel curriculum that addressed official and parental expectations as well as what Milani perceived as real needs. From the eyes of one of his former students, real needs were skills in critical and active citizenship "..that would later enable us to defend ourselves against the bosses, against the doctor's son, against the ruling classes" (Kleindeinst, in Hoffman, 1994).

The school's ethos is best captured in the motto inscribed on one of the walls. Written in English - "I Care" – it provided an antidote to dominant educational practices where individualism, achievement and selection were symptomatic of a system that reproduced dominant cultures and asymmetrical relations of power on the basis of specific class, gender and linguistic lines. Not only did pupils care but their caring also took the form of a pedagogical experience in which they were both teachers and learners, a political and pedagogical principle that Freire would develop, almost simultaneously, in Brazil (Mayo, 2007). Martinelli (2007) describes the Barbiana experience as a school with 23 teachers.

Milani himself tutored the first group of students. As students increased in number – in one particular summer there were around forty students - he adopted peer tutoring as a main pedagogical tool. Peer tutoring was possible because Milani fostered a spirit and mentality of cooperation among the students. Physically, the school adopted a flexible and circular arrangement which was conducive to cooperative learning. Such a pedagogy was also possible because Milani promoted the art of mutual listening, a skill that transformed students into student-teachers.

The Barbiana experience revolved around a very important principle – schools should not fail students. The authors of the *Lettera* considered failure as the weapon used by schools to perpetuate a 'caste system' (Darder, 1991) This was regarded by Milani as the root cause of most of the intra-class hatred, and by the authors of the *Lettera* as politically unsustainable and unconstitutional in that everyone was entitled, according to the Italian Constitution, to several, unrepeated years of education. Repetition and exclusion were discriminatory since they acted as sorting devises that ultimately pushed students from disadvantaged backgrounds out of the education system.

Visually and symbolically, the logic of inclusion was expressed in a different way at Barbiana. While at San Donato the holy cross was removed to create an open, non-denominational space for all, at Barbiana the holy cross reappeared on the wall, next to other symbols – Gandhi, Confucius, and the Cuban poem.

At Barbiana, time was perceived as a function of inclusion. The school community was prepared to slow down the pace not to leave anyone behind. Coverage, an obsession of modern curricula, was sacrificed for quality and collective well being. Furthermore, the Barbiana curriculum was essentially interdisciplinary and integrated in nature. It was perfectly possible for students to learn Mathematics during a lesson of Anatomy (Martinelli, 2007). While not using the term intercultural dialogue, Milani's curriculum centered around the affirmation and valorisation of difference. Difference was perceived by Milani as an essential ingredient in the formation of human beings as well as in the development of democratic societies.

Photographs of Milani in class with his children and video footage (Kleindeinst, 1994) indicate that, unlike San Donato, girls, albeit outnumbered by boys, did attend his school at Barbiana. There are also indications in the *Lettera* that the school did confront the issue of gender inequity. In a section dedicated to 'The girls', the authors problematise the absence of girls from town, referring to such absence at the school

of Barbiana as symptomatic of the prevailing mentality that 'woman can live her life with the brains of a hen.' The boys referred to such a mentality as a form of racism.

Milani's biographers, former students and collaborators confirm that Milani's pedagogical regime at Barbiana was more austere and disciplined than that of San Donato (Borg and Mayo, 2006). Borg and Mayo (2006) argue that Milani's austerity, like that of Gramsci's (Borg and Mayo, 2006), is based on the notion that success at school, perceived by many as value free and as a mirror-image of one's intelligence (sic), is largely dependent on material and cultural resources. Milani was aware that only long hours of hard work, critical analysis and linguistic competence could interrupt the boys' cycle of scholastic failure and, as a result, puncture the perpetuation of an education system that rewards the privileged.

The affective domain was central to the Barbiana curricular experience. While emotionally unpredictable and, at times, unbearably tough, Milani generated an emotional milieu characterised by warmth and genuine love. Often harsh with the outside world, Milani acted as a surrogate father who was always present and ready to endure a lot of pain for his pupils (Fallaci, 2005).

Milani's obsession with language became more apparent at Barbiana. Milani conducted one- to three-hour-a-day, reading sessions. These sessions were consciously meant to sharpen the students' use of the Italian language and to provide them with a backdrop to understand the world from the point of view of the oppressed. During these sessions, students were exposed to narratives of revolutions, wars, resistance, liberation movements, trade unionism and social movements, among others. These narratives were analysed against a historical backdrop that ranged from the war experience of their grandparents and parents to the Russian revolution or the wars of liberation in Africa and Asia. These reading sessions centered around Milani's idea that those who could not read and understand the first page of the newspaper were easily pushed to sports pages and doomed to a life of subordination.

Reading was not limited to newspapers. Books were also read loudly. Among the several books read, one of his students recalls Gandhi's autobiography, 'Apartheid' by Angelo Boca and the letters of Claude Eatherly (Martinelli, 2007). Socrates was also a favourite read at Barbiana. As with the newspapers, the reading of books was meant to stimulate critical thinking as well as exposing students to standard Italian. Some of the books took several weeks to cover as one sentence could stimulate a long-drawn discussion

Milani's approach to reading contrasted heavily with the fascist practice of using newspapers and periodicals for propaganda. Such was the case in 1936 and 1941, during the occupation of Ethiopia and the first defeats in Africa respectively. Fascist propaganda was also disseminated in schools by Balilla and GILE.

Barbiana's curriculum was also characterised by an ongoing struggle against insularity. Such a struggle is symbolically represented by the completion of the road to Vicchio by the community itself and driving lessons as one of the first adult education activities at Barbiana. The Barbiana curriculum also provided a context for the struggle against ethnocentricity and mono-culturalism (Toriello, 2008). Apart

from the exposure to several types of texts, starting from 1959, Don Milani hosted a number of young foreigners with whom his students could interact in English, French or German. Those who demonstrated sufficient knowledge of any of the foreign languages would normally be encouraged to spend some time abroad. Such trips were preceded by lengthy preparations, especially if the student was considered by Milani to be very timid. The trips served a triple purpose: to consolidate students' knowledge of foreign languages; to help them overcome their shyness; and to help them in character formation. Ultimately, the experience of travelling abroad, what Milani considered as the end-of-compulsory-schooling-age exam (*l'esame di maturità*), added credibility to the intercultural dimension of Barbiana's curriculum as it was through such an experience that language genuinely served as an instrument of social relations, real exchange, culture and negotiation (Toriello, 2008).

The experience of living in foreign, mostly urban, centres and the direct encounter with foreign guests at Barbiana, complemented a teaching regime of foreign languages based on hours of listening to music records of, for example, Bob Dylan and Brassens, and to radio broadcasts. Those who arrived early in the morning would find Milani preparing the materials for the day, which often included the recording of radio programmes in English, French, German or Spanish (Martinelli, 2007).

As indicated above, writing constituted a star skill in Barbiana's curricular repertoire. Milani taught students how to compile notes, place them on individual cards, organise the cards into categories, put categories into a sequence and name each section. Milani insisted that each section should be named. For Milani, a difficult-to-name paragraph meant that it either lacked substance or was overloaded. Named sections were meant to help Milani and his students to arrive at a logical sequence of statements which would eventually form a coherent whole. Once the paragraphs are put into a sequence, the language is filtered of difficult words, long sentences, repetitions, and overloaded and ambiguous sentences. This was all done collectively and with a commitment for quality.

Milani started experimenting with collective writing in 1950 when he used a rather crude version of the foregoing pedagogy to build a collage of student writings around the life of Jesus. Milani, clearly influenced by Mario Lodi, perfected the writing process in question and was followed rigorously in the writing of the *Lettera*.

Milani's writing principles are described in the *Lettera:*

> Have something important to say, something useful to everyone or at least to many. Know for whom you are writing. Gather all useful materials. Find a logical pattern with which to develop the theme. Eliminate every useless word. Eliminate every word not used in the spoken language. Never set time limits (in Rossi and Cole, 1970, p. 25).

Written by eight of his students, all boys and in their teens, the 'I' of the *Lettera* is a composite of the eight authors while the 'you' they address throughout the book represents the kind of teachers they had encountered in schools – teachers who were

more likely to harbour negative attitudues towards low-socioeconomic-status children and whose lower expectations were fuelled by testing and tracking procedures which were themselves stacked against lower-class children. Well aware that there are teachers who care – Milani was one of them – the boys distinguished between a teacher whose attitude and action contributed to their exile to a life of labour in the fields and a teacher, like Milani, who loves unconditionally to the point of going on a hunger strike to reclaim a child who was taken away from school by his parents (Abbate, 2008).

The catalyst for writing the *Lettera* came from a series of failures experienced by three of his students on their way to becoming teachers: Enrico, Luciano and Michele. Most of the themes were developed in an earlier letter, written in December, 1965, and addressed to a teacher of the *Istituto magistrale*.

Lettera a una professoressa was written at a time when Milani knew he was terminally ill, having been diagnosed in 1957 with Hodgkin's disease and, later, with leukemia. In addition to the chronic pain and discomfort, Milani was very bitter over the official condemnation and subsequent removal from the commercial book shelves of the book published in 1958 – *Esperienze Pastorali* – that exposed the puerile spirituality of the parishioners of San Donato and its environs. He also received further denunciation from Archbishop Florit who criticised his attiutde and positions and accused him of *classismo* (classism). Such denunciation angered Milani to the extent that he asked bourgeois intellectuals and collaborators to stay away from Barbiana. This was a time when Milani's rapport with the world turned sour.

The *Lettera* was also written in the shadow of a major controversy that started in 1965 when Milani's health had deteriorated to such an extent that he was no longer able to travel to Rome. A group of retired military chaplains published a letter in *La Nazione* denouncing those who refused service in the Italian army on the grounds that they were conscientious objectors. The chaplains considered conscientious objection as an insult to the fatherland and to its fallen. They also referred to conscientious objection as something alien to the Christian commandment of love, and as an expression of cowardice.

Considering the chaplains' letter as diametrically opposed to his educational philosophy, one based on critical reading of the world rather than passive acceptance of cultural invasion, Milani, in conversation with his students, crafted a letter that linked obedience with support for a string of unjust and repressive wars waged by Fascist Italy that served only the privileged. His historical analysis led him to conclude that the liberal-bourgios monarchy, from 1862 to its downfall, waged wars but did very little for the poor. He also questioned the chaplains' faith by asking: "Is it God or men that we ought to obey?"

Milani's letter was immediately condemned by the veterans of war. The public confrontation that developed as a result of the two letters, including the *autodifesa* (self-defence) that followed, attracted a lot of Barbiana-centered attention, both locally and internationally, including that of Eric Fromm who sent his secretary,