

Nguyễn Duy Khang

Vinh Long Community College¹ (Vietnam)

ndkhang@vlcc.edu.vn

From “Letter to a Teacher”: seeking the implied portraits of a good teacher. A Vietnamese father’s perspective

Summary

This article aims at portraying the characteristics of a good teacher through “Letter to a Teacher” – the work of Lorenzo Milani and eight boys of “Barbiana” – from an Asian perspective. Beyond this discourse, the analysis has implied that a good teacher (1) gives constructive feedback, (2) has knowledge, (3) uses marks properly, (4) balances and satisfies learners’ needs, (5) looks into the roots of problems, (6) cares for the learners, (7) limits inequality, (8) thinks critically and is responsible, and (9) communicates well in most cases.

Keywords: good teacher, portraits of a good teacher, a Vietnamese perspective of a good teacher, letter to a teacher, Lorenzo Milani, school of Barbiana.

Rationale

“Letter to a Teacher” has inspired my educational spirit since I first read it as a preparation for critical pedagogy. Though the title of the book does not literally mean that the text was addressed to “a teacher”, the implications have been understood and interpreted in various aspects of education, justice, or even the common desire to change the destiny of the underprivileged. The *letter* continues to catch my attention when I can see the image of my son, the way the majority of teachers in Vietnam think, and the traditional teaching methods in a different academic term as “banking education” (Freire 1972).

First, the learners in certain socio-economic conditions suffered inequalities not only in their education, but also in society. My son was in a similar situation and I deeply experienced it so that I could not stop myself from reading the rest of the book. I received the exact identical advice

“... he is not suitable for study...” (p. 34)

¹ Vinh Long Community College (VLCC) is a state-run institution, first established in 1979. Its role and function have changed over the years, but it has consistently provided high-quality training for the community. VLCC provides multi-level and multi-disciplinary training programs to nearly 4,000 students from Vinh Long and the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam.

As a teacher in the higher education context, I wish I were unaware of “how education should function”. My son was supposed, like other children at the age of six to start the first grade. But there was one major difference. As mentioned in the Law of Education 2005 of Vietnam, the first grade aims to provide children with writing, reading, and mathematics at the basic levels. The Law prohibits any advance literacy teaching at the kindergarten level. Therefore, I did not allow him to learn to read and write prior to elementary level. Up to the age of 5 years old, he also took the formal children’s programs as the others did. However, the difference in his participation was due to the private lessons of reading and writing most other children had already taken. It greatly affected my son’s status in the group. The teacher had to focus on the majority of learners who already knew the basic combination of Vietnamese language characters. The result was that the aforementioned advice was passed directly to me. After thoroughly studying the situation, I was shocked even more when children in the big cities had many options to take entrance exams to the first grade of elementary with mathematics, English, and reading tests. The phenomenon leads to education being influenced by private tension which is a big thing in South East Asia according to Mark Bray’s research (Bray 2013).

Secondly, the *book* also reminds me of typical Vietnamese teachers and the conservative and inflexible spirit of the profession. The teachers are strongly affected by rules and regulations in the top-down model of the educational system. Being oppressed for a long time, the teachers possibly turn the praxis to a revolution. However, this reform triggered some resistance. It consolidates the features of banking education, but hides renovated ideas from its early start. Both contexts make teachers experience the situations as of Milani and his students and that of those who maintained the postulates about the learners, characteristics of the learning process, and public opinion about education.

Last, but not least, the concept of banking education is not new, but it is understood in my teaching context as traditional methods in which a teacher tends to pour knowledge into the learners, according to Dewey. In the Vietnam context, it was applied under the philosophies of Confucius and other ancient scholars more than a thousand years ago. With a similar philosophy, the learning process is simply one-way communication or monologues from the teachers’ side. Students tend to be timid and passively accept the knowledge from the teachers without or with limited questions from the other side. In the long run, part of this educational philosophy has influenced the Vietnamese educational system in such a way that students have currently failed to enter real life.

In short, the book consists of the souls, the attempts, and the desires of not only educators, but also people from other disciplines in this world. The given contexts in “Letter to a Teacher” encourage me to seek applicable lessons later in equivalent situations. For that reason, my own study aims to find the implied features of a good teacher from analyzing the *letter* from different angles. In order to facilitate the findings, a brief introduction to the book and its authors, including Lorenzo Milani, will provide penetrative insights into the settings for better analysis. Then, from the analysis, reflection and review from the texts will help me draw the image of a good teacher.

Brief introduction about “Letter to a Teacher”

The book entitled “Letter to a Teacher: Lorenzo Milani’s Contribution to Critical Citizenship”, which was translated from Italian in the first version in 1969, was actually meant not for teachers when it was written, but for parents, in the form of a call to action. The school in the book named as Barbiana which is not a school, but the name of a town in the community in Tuscany. This school was founded by Don Lorenzo Milani after the time he was ordered by the church to be the pillar of this area in 1954. This book was based on eight cases of boys from his boarding school – using the “group writing” method during the period of one year under Milani’s coordination.

The model of Barbiana was organized in such a way as to meet the needs of students who were from working-class families and mainly suffered with their critical situation in education. These students had either failed their exams, had been expelled from school, or were depressed by the way they were taught prior to Milani’s school.

In this school, the students’ learning was tailored to their needs. The children were encouraged to learn and spend a lot of time drilling others – the older helped the younger. The book was written by poor country children of peasant families in Tuscany and their voice showed the mass of experiences and, as the oppressed, has been touching the spirits and lives of a countless number of readers all over the world.

The portrait of teachers in the book and the implied features of a good teacher

This section will mainly focus on finding the teachers’ personality and that of the implied features of a good teacher. These features are not simply extracted from the literature in the book. This paper aims either to interpret beyond the texts, or negate the negative sides of what has been described as the characteristics of a teacher.

“The oldest of those teachers was sixteen years old. The youngest was twelve, and I was full of admiration for him. I decided from the first day that even I would teach.” (p. 36)

A Vietnamese proverb says that learners sometimes learn better from their friends than from their teachers. In similar situations as in the above extract, it is more in the case of children helping each other as peers, from teaching to drilling the lessons, that one has full admiration for the job. The implied meaning from my perspectives here is that a good teacher must place his or her ego on a level with the learners and narrow the distance between teacher and students so as to better understand them. That leads to the enthusiasm of both sides in the educational process. The good point of the students in this context that other educators do not easily possess is spiritual inspiration which makes the character in the book “full of admiration.”

Teachers may do this, but a good teacher may not

"...the teacher had told my parents not to waste money: send him to the fields. He is not suitable for study." (p. 34)

"Sandro was humiliated, he was an adult. The teachers deemed he was an idiot. ... Gianni was judged by his teachers to be a criminal." (p. 40)

Gianni did not know how to write the h in "to have" verb. But he knew many things ... some evenings he went with his father to the Communist Party premises or to the Local Council sittings.

A class of idiots. Ours was old-fashioned. ... He started telling everyone that he had been given a class of idiots. (p. 49)

Life teaches us to be more generous and remember the roles of educators who are not simply judges. It does not shock me when careless, sensitive, and compulsory advice is spoken by a teacher. I am already familiar with this kind of comments. However, if the aforementioned citations do not show again a one-way imposition, the teacher should look at the learners' disadvantages as a sort of inputs for an improved modification of his teaching techniques. Moreover, in the real settings of the book, the authors are in their general education, neither vocational nor special education, the ideas of equality will not allow the teachers to pass the buck to the chaos in the society and ignore the existence of these children. From that basic, the characteristic of a good teacher which is implied in these extracts has an opposite identity. The teacher should care about the learners, sympathize with their difficulties, and be willing to help them overcome all drawbacks. Teachers' attitudes and prejudice about the learners will always give positive or negative effects in teaching and only teachers can decide whether that is a good or bad result. Therefore, a good teacher also needs to positively look at the good signs of the learners, not to think of or give such a negative assessment as "not suitable for study" or the immediate announcement of "having a class of idiots", which may harm the children's innocent spirit forever.

Full knowledge of pedagogy does not teach, the teachers do, and a good teacher applies it appropriately to his or her learners

"You, Reverend, have not studied Pedagogy. Polianski says that for boys, sports is a physio-psycho..." (p. 36)

Child teacher. ... I was teacher for three half-days a week. I taught geography, mathematics and French to the prima media class. In order to skim through an atlas or to explain fractions one does not need a degree.

... mistakes ... it did not matter much... we looked up things together. The hours passed serenely, without fear and without feelings of submission. (p. 37)

... with Roman and Greeks, you had made him hate all History. We could stay on for four hours without budging when we had lessons about the War. (p. 41)

In education, it is important to notice the teaching approaches which engage the learners in learning activities in order that the teachers should be mostly required to be trained in

these methods. The matter of knowing the methods and using them appropriately to the context is totally different. From the book's perspective, early education teachers could do something that a normal teacher could not easily do because of the appropriateness of the methods. A well-prepared teacher should learn to be able to use the right techniques that encourage the learners to overcome their difficulties, if any occur. As companions, some teachers of children have done something amazing in making children who hate history want to "stay" for a long time with it. In addition, it is not a right or wrong thing here; it is the way a teacher must consider himself or herself in the educational pictures of the children. For that reason, a good teacher should be qualified with the required knowledge, but he or she should use the methods and knowledge in such a way that learners feel eager to learn. The lessons will attract them and change their attitudes to the courses. There should be some moments when a good teacher must forget his ego as knowledgeable and aim to share and guide, as both he and his pupils have the same goals of learning and discovering. This characteristic can also be clarified better in the following extract. A teacher should be modern in terms of thinking and acting, not in terms of using labels at all. The more a teacher leaves behind the notion of banking education, the more he or she becomes successful in the job.

It would be better to have an old-fashioned teacher rather than one who thinks he is modern just because he has changed the labels. (p. 49)

Teachers use marks; families love their children's good marks, but what about the values?

Day after day they study for marks, for reports, for their diploma. And in the meantime they are distracted from the beautiful things they study. Languages, History, Science, everything becomes a mark and nothing else. (p. 47)

The tragedy of the older ones. But nobody carries the placard. And the teachers do not look at the date of birth on the result sheet. They look at marks. (p. 70)

You can continue being lazy at your teacher's desk putting your little marks on the result sheet. (p. 138)

It happens everywhere in the world now that people tend to look at marks or a diploma for the abilities of one person. It is not the matter of being right or wrong according to the cultural and traditional backgrounds of a community. The book has a similar context. Marks become the priority no matter how valuable they could be, given by whom, and for what criteria. When society, the family, the children, and even teachers pay a great deal of attention to marks and then in return classify the children again into groups, learning is not simply searching for knowledge and practicing skills, but a really stupid race. The influence of this phenomenon taken to extremes would destroy the beauty of learning activities and produce only inequality in education and beyond. With similar situations in the book, I believe that a teacher could not do much in dealing with the issues. However, if a good teacher wants, a series of lessons could be drawn out from these simple lessons.

- Marks should be used with other alternatives for evaluation with obvious and manageable criteria.
- A diploma is important but skills and creativity are encouraged.
- Teachers give grades so let us do it intelligently.
- Competition for marks should be controlled and not allowed to distract from the beautiful things learners can study.
- Teachers should proceed to change themselves, the learners', and their parents' attitudes towards to the pseudo-roles of marks in education.
- Teachers should not look at marks as the only tool in hand; each learner is always a surprise in terms of capacity and diversity.
- Putting marks on the report should not be the priority in the teaching career.

A good teacher knows how to balance, satisfies the learners' needs, and makes sure that things are in accordance with the regulations

All teachers know how to follow the core requirements and knowledge of the programme and understand the inconsistency beyond. Core knowledge may or may not immediately be useful for life. Teachers are always trapped in the dilemma of what should be included for the learners and what should be neglected.

During the exams we had to tear ourselves away from the miserliness of our studies for a couple of hours to read the newspaper, because there is nothing in the newspapers which is useful for your exams. This proves that there is little of your school that is useful to life. (p. 50)

A good teacher in any case should find the balance between the requirements and what the learners are interested in learning. Learners can learn only when they feel comfortable, but they also need to take the "exams". If a teacher has the right to decide, it is very easy; however, teachers must always follow the guides and rules. Finding and bringing useful things to the classroom is the job of a good teacher because the main purpose of this job is to facilitate skills and things which are useful in life.

Every teacher has a right to evaluate, but a good teacher looks deeper and wider into the roots of the problems

Sometimes, the wrong assumption leads to wrong evaluation. In education, it is common when teachers do not pay attention to the roots of the problem or even try to figure out the problem itself. Everybody has a right to judge and teachers use the right to evaluate their learners' capacity with either appropriate or inappropriate understandings due to the fact everyone has his or her own capacity. What happened in the context of the book is typical of the majority of teachers in many countries. It is a careless attitude towards the right to evaluate the learners. In a situation where people can easily assess others in such manners, teachers look like devils in the darkness. It is the fact that the teacher thinks that those

students are not able to do such entertained sport for physical education. However, it also means the opposite sites.

Unfortunate children. 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”. (p. 51)

Even he is like you. The ability to perform a conventional ritual seemed important to him. 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. (p. 52)

The teachers in these extracts have shut themselves in a box and look at things through the frame of that box. If it appears a good teacher, that person must think out of the box with critical thinking and provide possible variants about the learners’ capacity. “Not knowing how to play basket ball” is not a big deal in the purposes of physical education. The learners may look different, but what they are capable of doing should be considered carefully. A good teacher here also needs to understand well the learners’ capacity without any prejudice towards them.

A good teacher always thinks about the learners, not about self or others

Teaching as a job is not a game or a mess that one can try to blame or play the way one wants. I am quite familiar with the following extracts from the book. When a teacher thinks of something else, not the learners and their progress, the following scene may appear more often. It is neither a matter of money, nor a matter of inequality, but an ethical matter. Teachers should not return to this point though they have been there. Later or sooner, a teacher will understand that the “sense of satisfaction” could bring him or her to the negative sides of the job, the sides of evils which are originally derived from the wrong assumptions and expectations of the nobility.

Fail students. If the teacher is dying to fail someone she could vent her feelings on the sons of the rich.

... make an agreement with the parents: “Pierino is young, when he comes to face life choices he will be immature. What do you say, doctor, if we were to hold him back for a year”.

I can’t wait to be a teacher in order to feel this sense of satisfaction. With any luck, with your own little grandson. (p. 68)

It is a job, created for society, and for the same reasons, teachers will be evaluated from what they have done in the job. If the actions are not for the money, let us ignore the details. The reason could be from what some teachers have experienced. People may think they are the ones who give private tuition to rich families, fail those who are poor. All that can be seen obviously is the results of sending “11 unready children” into society. Only

teachers could do so and that blurs the image of this noble job here in Italy – the context of the *book*, in Vietnam, and in other corners of the world.

If you are against after-school classes I advise you not to show it. People are malicious. They might think that you give private lessons to the sons of the rich. (p. 54)

But dear teacher does not accept orders from the sovereign people. She fails and goes on holiday. (p. 61)

Fractions of equality. At the end of the elementary school, 11 children have already left school because of the teacher.

However, if a good teacher exists, that person knows the learners well so that he or she can have better plans to support them or guide them so as to improve their learning. In addition, a good teacher communicates well with everybody, even the children’s parents or the authorities. All who care about their children can be given explanations and offered options and plans. In fact, an effective teacher will never wait until the last moment of the year and fail the learners. During the teaching activities, the process of learning will help the teacher improve the learners’ skills and knowledge or guide them to overcome their own difficulties. A good teacher will not ignore the learners and go for holidays.

Inequality is everywhere, but a good teacher should know how to limit it

Sometimes she grumbles: “Now that they all come to school it is not possible to teach. Some illiterate children are coming” (p. 71)

What if the children who are coming to class hear this remark from their teacher? It is not supposed to be spoken by a person in the educational system at all. I have to admit that inequality happens everywhere but teachers have their duties to change the world. Actually, it has no meaning if the last belief or idea about bringing equality to life is being modified again in the teachers’ hands. Teaching is a job in which teachers should be tolerant with all students because illiteracy is not their fault.

“When I got them from the prima class they were totally illiterate. Now, instead, they do their work for me in a completely correct manner.” (p. 75) – the ones who remained are those who used to write correctly. The illiterates are still illiterate. She has just brushed them away from in front of her eyes.

The sad reality always reveals the hidden sides of society and it is not easy for every member to accept it fairly. It becomes quite common that people may believe in something not real or misinterpret the information they have had. It is like a delusion and I have never thought of the possible existence of the situation or something similar to that in the above extract. How could a teacher simply give an assessment on the learners’ work while he or she does not know them well enough? Similar actions could lead to a big gap in education between the teaching assumption and the reality. It is not worth being proud of a situation

when the listeners are made to be deaf or blind in understanding the aforementioned cases in the extract. In another example, at the greengrocer, when the teacher meets again his or her student, he or she wishes that he or she had done something differently.

At the greengrocers: ...it would be totally different if she could tell him: "Why don't you come back to school? I passed you on purpose so that you'd return. Without you school is pointless." (p. 73)

There is nothing as unjust as trying to create equality among those who are not equal (p. 74)

My understanding of critical pedagogy and teaching philosophy have been strengthened after understanding this book. I have asked myself whether I will do similarly to the teacher described in the extracts and whether I am concerned with the conceptions of equality. Will I look down at some students and try to blame them for being in my class, or will I pass them out of my sight and be happy with what I believe, a belief that my students are finally able to read and write? The answer is no. I am not yet a good teacher, but I will not do that. And a good teacher will never consider the learners' problems as burdens, but as opportunities for his or her own professional experience. The teacher will try to quickly learn how to communicate with the learners and find out the roots of such issues. There will always be short and long term planning. A good teacher will look at the inequality factors and try to reduce their effects so that his or her learners may possibly forget their current status, however unequal it is, and may come to believe that they are all equal in the same methods, the same teacher, and the same learning objectives. A good teacher knows how to persuade learners to cooperate, learn, and be comfortable with their learning. No real equality exists in life, but a teacher must lead the learners to this target and prove to them that it is possible.

Thinking critically is advisable but "passing the buck" is not a characteristic of a good teacher

In the educational system, the tendency is to put the blame for failures on others. Teachers in a secondary school may pass the learners' problems back to previous levels and believe that all are from the early stages and not their fault. They state that they have received the wrong products and in the short time of only a few years left in high school, there is not much that teachers can change. It is even more common that some teachers would try to blame situations, causes, or problems which could explain something in which they do not want to be involved.

Passing the buck. A colleague of yours of the *medie* school [middle school]² (a meek newly-wed who in the *prima* class [earlier or primary class]³ had turned away 10 out of 28, she and her husband are both active Communists) objected: "I have not chased them away. I only failed them. If their parents do not decide to send them back, too bad for them". (p. 80)

² Inserted by the author to clarify the meaning of the extract.

³ Inserted by the author to clarify the meaning of the extract.

I have to agree that teachers may not have full rights in giving decisions, but failing someone is within their powers. A good teacher should take notice of this in the first class. Education is a place where students come to be educated and everybody has his or her own talents. Teachers are the ones to recognize these special characteristics and strong points of the learners. A good teacher will not hesitate to study them carefully and help them maximize their learning capacities or, if their capacities are lower than expected, all have a year at least for making any changes. In fact, the good teacher is always responsible for his or her teaching and decision, and "passing the buck" will never exist in the dictionary. The good teacher is smart enough to learn even from his or her learners, to work with them, to communicate well and make them understand, and to help them overcome any barriers in their way. In my opinion, passing the problems to others is commonly a characteristic of those who are not suitable for this noble job.

A good teacher communicates well in most cases, especially with his or her students

An appropriate attitude is important and in education it can positively or negatively affect the listeners – the oppressed at school. A bad attitude to the learners' performance can even cause a bad impact forever on the learners' mind. For that reason, the language for classroom communication will be helpful for the learners if the teacher selects to use it in a positive way. And it will become a disaster to them if the teacher does not carefully select what he or she casually says. In the next extracts, the comments are considered to be assertive and will not contribute anything to the learners' learning progress.

The comments... "Childish. Puerile. Shows immaturity. Unsatisfactory. Trivial..." (p. 136)
 Or "Poor content. Modest concepts. Dull ideas. ... try to improve the form. Incorrect form. Not fluent. Not clear. Not well structured." (p. 137)

In another example, a teacher who is supposed to sympathize with the learners usually imposes his or her thoughts through the teaching lessons and the evaluation. In terms of language for communication, the selected language illustrates the teacher's carelessness and his educational manner is not appropriate enough for the teaching job. In the requirements of this career, assessment always brings two kinds of effects. The good and encouraging comments could encourage the learners and inspire them into the learning process.

In seeking the hidden portrait of a good teacher in this book,

...The teacher gives all he believes in, loves, hopes to a child. The child, as he grows up, adds something to it and so humanity moves forward ... (p. 125)

I totally agree with the authors of the book(s?) and all teachers who teach with the heart and care for the learners' learning and mental and physical development. A good teacher will give all that he believes in, with love and hopes for the bright future of the learners' emancipation.

To sum up, my adventure for finding the characteristics of a good teacher had started before I read this book; however, it marks a turning-point in my interests and findings. The book itself includes various values and aspects of social life, pedagogies, and philosophies which extend far beyond its contents. I attempt to seek the good teacher whose character could be seen directly, or the quotes that possibly lie hidden in the texts. From my understanding and reflections on the job in the context of my own teaching, the implications, which could obviously be recognized when reading or reflecting on the book context, are related to other methods of a good teacher.

In order to form a good teacher what is needed is a closed school that does not lead to anything else ... One that makes a child from the race of peasants, who has already chosen [his or her own destiny]⁴, feel at home. (p. 123)

Being a good teacher is not a matter of difficulties, but a matter of whether one teacher would like to be excellent or not. ‘Good’ and ‘excellent’ here imply the meanings of being facilitating, guiding, and caring. One thing to bear in mind with the job is that the teacher remembers and plays his or her exact roles in the teaching methods, and the job requires him or her to encourage the learners, be enthusiastic, and care for their developments as well as be their friend.

Conclusion

Truly, the book brings a view of education to the world and the explicit guides to me. It touches educators, educational managers, parents, and those who read it. In trying to find the implied portraits of a good teacher beyond the discourse in the book, I have found some of the good characteristics from analyzing the extracts which are related to the authors’ questions, comments, or statements. In order to become a good teacher, all teachers must pay attention to the learners and the educational purposes and not do many activities or reactions as in the texts. As a result, some good characteristics could be seen as (1) giving constructive feedback to learners no matter how poorly they perform, (2) having full knowledge of pedagogy that should be applied appropriately to his or her learners, (3) using marks intelligently and considering their informative value, (4) balancing and satisfying the learners’ need with the requirements of the regulations, (5) looking deeper and wider into the roots of problems, (6) caring for the learners, not for self or others, (7) limiting inequality, (8) thinking critically and being responsible, and (9) having good communicative skills in most cases, especially with their students. From the lessons that I can learn from the book, I myself have found the good teacher from the perspective of the authors of the book and consequently those characteristics will help me better in my future job in a critical way.

⁴ Inserted by the author to clarify the meaning of the extract.

References

- Borg C., Cardona M., and Caruana S. (2009), *Letter to a Teacher: Lorenzo Milani's Contribution to Critical Citizenship*. Malta, Agenda.
- Bray M. (2013), *Benefits and tensions of shadow education: comparative perspectives on the roles and impact of private supplementary tutoring in the lives of Hong Kong students*. “Journal of International and Comparative Education”, 2 (1).
- Dewey J. (1997), *Democracy and Education, An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York, The Free Press.
- Freire P. (1972), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.