

SIGNATURE

by Elizabeth (Larc) Abbot '80

Just Different, Educationally

Though I have lived in Italy for more than 20 years, many aspects of daily life there still contain an element of mystery for me—but not for my teenage sons. They attend an Italian public classical studies secondary school (liceo classico), located in the center of Rome. There they are learning not only the culture of ancient civilizations—remnants of which lie just outside their window—but also the cultural subtleties of 21st century Italy.

While American friends widen their eyes in disbelief when they learn that my children each have one teacher who covers five of their seven subjects, no choice in their individual program of study and no lockers, I attempt to suspend judgment on the profound differences in educational systems and simply observe the process in which a new generation of Italians, including my bi-cultural children, is being formed.

The public liceo classico, which my sons chose, once formed the elite classes and remains at the upper end of the educational spectrum. It covers the equivalent of ninth to 13th grade. In the first two years, all students follow the same program of Italian, Greek, Latin, history, geography, math, English, religion (optional) and phys ed. Sciences and philosophy are added in the next three years.

An Italian mother recently asked me, “Why do American students choose their courses, when the Ministry of Education would know best how to put together a coherent, comprehensive program?” In her opinion, and that of most Italians, one should choose a school with a certain orientation and follow its program.

The United States is one of the few countries in which each high school student follows an individualized program of study within an umbrella structure that encompasses a wide range of

backgrounds and with different capabilities, interests and aspirations. Representing a nation of individualists, the U.S. education system both reflects and nourishes this individualistic culture.

In the Italian system, a culture that values close-knit relationships, starting with the family, is reinforced at school. My sons’ school does not have lockers. Students are divided into six sections, and each section remains in the same classroom all day with backpacks on the floor while teachers rotate, carrying their wares on their backs. Although students don’t have a cafeteria or lockers to socialize around, they spend five years with the same classmates following the same program of study and forming deep friendships and important lifetime connections.

Four hours with one teacher can be interminable in the time frame of my 14-year-old, but within these long stretches his teacher can exercise and teach another important Italian cultural value: flexibility. She can carry an exercise or an argument to its conclusion, give more time to one subject or another as she sees the need and integrate subjects in a multidisciplinary fashion while also allowing breaks to fall naturally, not necessarily on the hour.

In contrast, I remember from my high school days that classes started on time and finished on time, even if the teacher or student was mid-phrase. Most Americans live time in a sequential, linear fashion, and school reinforces this cultural norm—individual classes of differing lengths, breaks, study halls and lunch all fit into an elaborate web. When the bell rings, students jump.

My sons occasionally arrive in class to find that an announced test or assignment has been postponed or modified. Teachers expect their students to study the material every day in a cumulative fashion and to be prepared at all times, not necessarily according to clear deadlines.

At my American high school I had clear guidelines as to where I stood with respect to my classmates and clear expectations on grading, test dates and grading curves that reinforced important aspects of my culture. My children, meanwhile, are learning to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty, to be flexible and assess risk.

At the end of the five years, Italian liceo students take a final Maturità exam that includes both written and oral sections on the subjects they have covered. The oral exam of the Maturità, which takes place in front of a commission of teachers, is the culmination of a tradition of oral exams throughout the liceo years. As one teacher explained to me, “Multiple-choice tests do not assess the actual preparation of a student, which can only be done properly through individual interrogations.”

On interrogation day the teacher randomly calls out the names of four or five students to come to the front of the class. Although the students know in advance that an interrogation will take place, they do not know when they’ll be called upon. Thus Italian liceo students learn to think on their feet and express themselves orally, an essential skill for university study where nearly all exams are oral, in front of a commission and for life in this animated and oral society.

Twice per year, students are allowed to back out of an interrogation with no penalty by saying, “I am not prepared today.” What stress, I think, terrified at the thought of having an interrogation. But it doesn’t seem to faze my children. Then again, they are Italian.

Elizabeth (Larc) Abbot '80 is writing a book about cultural learning. Contact her at eabbot2001@yahoo.com to share your experiences raising bi-cultural children in the United States or abroad.