



# ***Education in Italy: 10 lessons learned from an immersion semester***

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***During the Spring Semester I directed a program  
with nine teacher candidates to Siena, Italy,***

where we spent five months living in the community, while supporting English language instruction in three schools. During that time, I traveled across the country, visited schools and teachers, collaborated with Italian educators, engaged in open conversation with students, and struggled as a second language learner immersed in Italian study. This article summarizes key points that I learned about education in Italy, during a full semester of teaching and learning, as my teacher candidates and I launched the first education track.



### **1. School Organization**

This school of 850 in Salerno is huge; the 19th-century structure sits four floors higher than the street level and extends across two city blocks. There are no elevators; rather, slabs of marble and stone flights of stairs lead to the upper levels.

Dr. Matera, the principal, who has 35 years of experience as an educator and school administrator, provides me with necessary background on the formal educational structure, beginning with the infantile (toddlers), and progressing through materna (3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds), elementari (6- to 11-year-olds), mediale (12- to 14-year-olds), and secondaria (15- to 18-year-olds). The K-8 school includes four of these five levels of Italian education, housed in separate wings of the building.

"In Italy, compulsory schooling begins at age 6," Dr. Matera notes. "However, many parents take advantage of free public preschool provided by the government to all 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds." I saw parents walking their young children to school, or riding with them on the backs of their bicycles, and congregating outside the building with other parents.

In the preschooler area, the children are laughing as two female teachers engage in play and arts-based activities. A few spot me smiling in the hallway and wave to "la straniera." The primary students in navy and white uniforms hold hands as they return to their classroom with a paper they carry between them.

After the visit, I board the train back to Toscana, the region that has been home for me for over five months.

### **2. Lifetime Looping**

Gianni, a kind-hearted 10-year-old, gives his teacher, Laura, a hug. She laughs at his joke and sends him off to his seat. He has outgrown his royal blue smock and it no longer covers his corduroy pants. Laura shakes her head, but can't contain her smile. "I have had them [she motions to her class] since they were in the 1st grade. They are like my own children. I care for them deeply. I am going to be so sad in June, when I have to say

goodbye to them." She acknowledges the public displays of affection between student and teacher and admits, "Even my male students hug me. It is seen as a sign of care and respect."

Students begin looping with teachers across grade levels beginning in 1st grade (1st-2nd, 2nd-3rd, 3rd-4th, 4th-5th). I term this practice "*lifetime looping*." The focus is on teachers learning about students over time, and building up relationships, rather than on content knowledge for any specialized grade level. K-8 schools across the country appear to favor this teacher/student progression.

### **3. Textbooks**

Textbooks outline the state curriculum that needs to be followed verbatim. The government (Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca - MIUR) pays for all textbooks for elementary grade children. The schools (whether religious, Catholic, private) select the actual texts, but the publishing companies contract directly with the government. Books with the imprint Ministry of Indirrizo are freely provided to all students. If a price is noted on the back cover, it is a supplemental text the parents pay for.

Students use wheeled backpacks to transport their books and homework assignments. Even 1st-graders have several textbook assignments to complete and leave school with overloaded bags.

### **4. Attendance**

The school year in Italy begins in September and ends in late June. Even in the public schools, school calendars adhere to national and religious holidays. Students return to school for the winter term after January 6 (Three Kings' Day). During my semester in Italy, four holidays were observed: Carnevale (the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday), Easter (10-day vacation that includes Good Friday and Easter Monday), Liberation Day (April 25), and Worker's Day (May 1).

Students attend school on either a Monday-Saturday schedule (from 8:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m., with lunch [pranza] at home) or a Monday-Friday schedule (from 8:30 a.m.-4:30



p.m., with lunch at school). Depending upon the school, teachers on the Monday through Friday schedule are in school until 5:30 p.m., which makes for very long days.

I was able to eat lunch with 5th-graders at a private Catholic school in Siena in the cleanest lunchroom I've ever seen. The students and teachers give a song of thanks in unison, and then are expected to eat and not talk during lunch. A hot pasta (un primo corso) is served first, followed by cheese/bread or hot vegetables. The students drink water from a pitcher placed at the center of the table, refilling small plastic cups as needed. For a snack they have oranges or apples. No dessert is served and there are no vending machines on site for students to purchase any type of snack, soft drink, or candy.

### **5. Instruction**

Instruction is tied to mandated curriculum that is formalized and particularized by grade level/subject, and predetermined by the Ministry of Education. The teacher is the presenter of "information" and most employ didactic approaches based upon the textbook presentation and sequence, which is then tested in scheduled exams.

Luisa Carretti, an Italian journalist from Puglia, and mother to a 6-year-old, tells me:

"The program of study is imposed by the Ministry of Education for all public schools. Teachers just follow the program. They can't change it, or can't stop, even if children don't understand. I am concerned because childhood curiosity is less desirable than compliance. It is not the norm to ask questions; that is viewed as upstaging the teacher. So, I am concerned for my daughter, who is an inquisitive child.

"We don't really have special needs' programs here. I have a teacher friend who always tries to learn more through professional development. She met a researcher who works in Calabria and took a course on how to teach children with dyslexia, but there are few resources for teachers and little funding to support exceptional learners."

My teacher candidates are given a pink or red pen to correct student tests and submitted work. Answers are either right or wrong. When one of my more mature teacher candidates, herself a mother of grown children, responded with a quizzical look, one kindergarten

teacher responded, “If they can’t see their mistakes (noted in red), how do they know to correct them? We can see the progress that students make when they see what needs to be changed.”

## **6. Teachers**

Teachers are predominately female, experienced, and range in age between 38-55 (data from The Ministry of Education). During school visits in Toscana, Campania, and Reggio Emilia, I observed that all the teachers in the scuole infantili, scuole materne, and scuole elementari were female, and few were younger than 30. Teachers value seniority, and remain in the profession for their career; many begin in one school and remain there for years.

A colleague mentioned the need to postpone retirement in the current economic climate. As a result, there is an older teaching force who is less likely to be proficient in English or technology. Our undergraduate teacher candidates were well received. Their energy and enthusiasm integrated well with existing English instruction programs that we were supporting.

Elementary teachers are responsible for teaching all subjects, including English. Most are not proficient in English and rely on workbooks and audiotapes for pronunciation of terms. Some classes do rotate teachers (for 3rd-grade math instruction, for example), but the students remain seated at their desks, which are aligned in horizontal rows (of five) and vertical rows (of four).

The idea of breaking students into small instructional groups to reduce the pupil/teacher ratio was a new concept and teaching strategy. After trust was established, I modeled this approach with the teacher candidates and the English teacher at one school. We were then offered the opportunity to integrate this approach more regularly during our second month on-site in the 4th-grade classroom. As my teacher candidates became more confident, they tried it in other settings, and invited me to team-teach with them.

Laura and Dania, teachers at two different school sites, said, “Your students are really exciting to watch. They

teach the lesson in a way that uses the book, but that’s original and engages students so that they understand and apply the knowledge.”

## **7. Attire**

Students in a many elementary schools don’t wear uniforms in the traditional sense of white shirts and trousers. Rather, royal blue smocks with white collars are the norm, which are worn over street clothes (leggings/pants). Students in both private and public schools resemble artists at work, in their flowing gowns that extend to their calves.

The children’s names are embroidered on the smocks, and it is not uncommon to see children walking around town in their royal blue attire. On gym days, students arrive in matching two-piece, royal blue sweat suits. For the teachers, jeans and very casual pants are the norm.

## **8. Middle School**

Fortunately for students and teachers in Siena, all three levels of school (preschool, elementary, and middle) are clustered in two blocks of one section of the city. The middle school teachers also adhere to the looping practice. In 6th grade, students are assigned to two or three teachers who instruct them in at least three subjects over consecutive years. There are three sections of every grade level, with about 23 students in each class. While one teacher is responsible for teaching all subjects on the elementary level, middle school classes (grades 6-8) offer students the opportunity to learn from subject matter specialists. For example, Dr. Tuliani taught history, geography, and Italian to one class of students over their three years in the middle school.

Julio, an 8th-grader, with a double-wrapped scarf over his hooded sweatshirt, eagerly shares why his teacher is amazing. His eyes widen with genuine enthusiasm, and he talks with his entire body, gesturing and shaking his head, while a wave of cocoa hair, Italian style—long and wavy on top, with shaved sides—drops off to the right center of his forehead. “Il nostro Professore, è il migliore.” (Our teacher [Dr. Tuliani] is the best.) “He knows and uses technology to teach.”



Dr. Tuliani is a respected and popular male teacher and role model. The students respect his intelligence and his calm demeanor. In a recent e-mail, he told me his class was going for their “final gelato” after three years together.

The only male teachers I met in Italy were middle school teachers, teaching physical education, math, and history, and accompanying their adolescent students on field trips across the country. (Parents do not usually chaperone school field trips.)

I also saw chair lift accommodations for students with special needs in the middle school, but little is provided in the way of one-on-one special education instruction.

### **9. Technology**

Dr. Tuliani teaches three subjects. He takes his students around the globe and back. He earned his doctorate at the University of Siena in medieval history. A native of the city, he is active in his contrada (one of the 17 cultural sections within the city that trace history and lineage back 800 years).

Dr. Tuliani integrates technology into the teaching of history, geography, and Italian. He is one of only 24 Apple-trained technology educators in the country. “The students here know more about technology than their teachers,” he stated. “They practice on their own time, at home, developing projects.”

### **10. Language Learning**

Dr. Tuliani also notes a similar challenge with English language teaching: “Most teachers don’t speak English, and few use technology.” But Miriam Grottanelli de Santi, a bilingual (English/Italian) native of Siena, graduate of Siena schools, Cambridge University, and Director of the Siena School for the Liberal Arts, recognizes the future needs of the children in her beloved city. Her vision initiated the English education track in the schools.

She explained, “It is quite plausible that children who are required by the Ministry of Education to study English in schools here, from age 6-16, will never, over their entire

school career, learn the language by listening to a native English speaker.”

### **Closing Thoughts**

In Italy, the country of my grandfather, I felt a strong connection to the people, the teachers, and most of all, the children. I ragazzi sono incredibili!

In towns across Italy, I waved at children being transported on friendly yellow school buses, while I walked along uneven stone strade. In Firenze (Florence), I observed single-sex elementary schools (la scuola maschile and la scuola femminile) located on adjacent streets, yet housed in separate buildings, with unique playgrounds and entranceways. In Reggio Emilia, I noted street signs in four languages: Arabic, Mandarin, English, and Italian. And while I was observed on video surveillance outside school buildings, on streets, and in train stations in large urban centers, I always felt safe. I was welcomed in schools without ever walking through metal detectors or checkpoints armed by guards at the door.

After a semester abroad in Italy, and visits to 20 cities and towns, I leave with the knowledge that teachers across Italy work very long hours, vary in their approaches to teaching children, find themselves coping with responsibilities outside of school (elderly parents, sick children, finances, car trouble), spend multiple years with the same group of students, are required to teach a mandated curriculum and align to textbooks, and feel safe in their schools.

In spite of their collective personal and professional challenges and triumphs, educators in Italy offered a smile, a hug, thank-you gifts of books and flowers, and the cultural kiss on both cheeks that signaled that I was, and remain, more than a tourist, a visitor, or even a colleague.

Questa è certo: I arrived a stranger, an educator abroad, and left as a friend who recognizes that “Ciao, per adesso” (goodbye for now) means that invaluable gifts of trust, acceptance, access, and appreciation were exchanged.

