

The Overseas School of Rome

The highlight of my teaching career was the ten years spent at the Overseas School of Rome (OSR) from 1967 to 1976. OSR is a K-12 school with a diverse faculty and a multinational student body. I was lucky to be there when the elementary school experimented with new teaching techniques such as *new math* and new teaching formats like *team teaching*. To quote that great philosopher, Rush Limbaugh, the school was on “the forefront of societal evolution.”

OSR was founded for dependents of allied military personnel in 1946 right after World War II. When American and British parents discovered that the military base was being moved to Trieste, they decided to form their own school. The school would be nonsectarian and international combining the best of the American and British educational systems. These parents managed to get the British and American ambassadors to sponsor the school.

The K-12 school opened its doors in October 1947 with only 60 students. Enrollment began to rise steadily until 1969. This was due to the increased numbers of Americans assigned to embassies, consulates, and the Food and Agricultural Organization (part of the United Nations) which was headquartered in Rome. From 1950 to 1970 many artists, scholars, journalists, and professionals lived in Rome. By 1969, enrollment peaked at over 800 students.

Norman Rockwell's grandson and Carol Baker's daughter were in Jules' first grade class. Burt Lancaster's daughter and Marlene Dietrich's grandson graduated from OSR in 1968. The son of the American ambassador, Harry Reinhart, was in my sixth grade class. Back then, the school was represented by over fifty countries. Many Italians sent their children to our school because they did not like the rigidity of the Italian educational system. OSR continually put up new buildings to satisfy the needs of the expanding school population. One of the

new structures was a two-story building with two sliding doors between the classrooms.

That spring, Dr. William Alexander from Harvard, known as the father of team teaching, visited our school and spoke about his vision of an ideal school format. Two of my fellow teachers and I were so impressed by his ideas that we asked the headmaster if we could try it. He gave us the go ahead.

It was Dr. Alexander's theory that team teaching could only work if the following conditions were in place:

- 1) The school had the right physical structure to combine classes. It just so happened that our new building had sliding doors which, when opened, could accommodate a large class of sixty or more students.
- 2) If one of the teachers was giving a group lesson to all three classes, the other two must be willing to act as aides and help students who didn't understand the lesson. Angela Volpicelli and Mary Bianchi, my fellow sixth grade teachers, joined with me as we put our egos aside to make the system work.
- 3) The students should be told from the beginning that they had not one, but three teachers.
- 4) All three teachers should attend all parent-teacher conferences after first having their own conference on each child.
- 5) The teachers have to get along and respect each other. In other words, act as a team.
- 6) Students should be divided into ability groups at the beginning of the school year. As the year went on, a student who fell behind in the highest group would be moved down to a lower group. Those who improved would be moved up to a higher group.
- 7) Teachers should have a common period each day to plan lessons and discuss the students' academic work.

Angela, Mary and I team-taught for three years. It took us two years to eliminate problems that we hadn't anticipated. We really didn't realize how much work went into monitoring the

progress of sixty students. By the third year everything ran like clockwork.

At OSR, in the 1960s and 1970s, all the power rested with the teachers not with the administrators. Teachers, under Italian law, had tenure after one year. Nothing they did would get them fired. Not slapping a child, not coming to class drunk, not even having an affair with a student, were grounds for dismissal.

The American teachers at OSR loved their jobs and the Italian way of life. They never wanted to leave the school. In 1976 I had been at OSR for ten years, and I was still third lowest in seniority of the 18 teachers in the elementary school.

Longevity has its rewards. The teachers, over the years, became good friends with many of the OSR School Board members. When a problem occurred, they could go directly to the Board and air their grievances. In most American school districts, this kind of direct contact is not possible. Usually only the superintendent or the principal meet with the Board. To be a Board member, your child had to attend OSR. Teachers got to know the Board at open houses and holiday parties. Unlike teachers, administrators came and went. During my ten years at the school, there were four different headmasters.

The teachers also had the support of the Italian courts. Most of the judges were members of the Communist Party. Communist judges usually rule in favor of the workers. When a physical education teacher slapped a student across the face, our principal promptly fired her. The fired teacher got an attorney and took her grievance to court. The judge not only ruled that the teacher should be reinstated, but that she should receive all back pay for the time that she was out of the classroom.

The most famous example of power being in the teacher's corner was the Roberts-Bowdein power struggle. Marcia Roberts, head of the English Department, had been at OSR for 20 years. John Bowdein was a brand new American headmaster. Marcia had collaborated with her husband, Paul, on the Robert's English Series, the most used English textbook in America. Marcia was very rich and very popular with the

Board. Every Christmas holiday she had a party at her fabulous high-rise apartment for the Board and the OSR staff.

Marcia's protege in the English Department was a well-known Irish poet named Desmond O'Grady. Desmond was an excellent teacher when he was sober. Mrs. Roberts never assigned Desmond a first period class because it took him half the morning to get rid of his hangover. To make matters worse, he was openly having an affair with one of the students in his poetry class. When Mr. Bowdein learned about this, he was outraged. He called Mrs. Roberts into his office.

"Don't you think Mr. O'Grady should be fired?" Bowdein asked.

"Desmond is an inspirational teacher. He has a doctorate from Harvard and is an asset to our school. Besides, the student he is in love with is over 18 years old and is an adult in the eyes of the Italian courts. Her parents don't object to the romance so why should you? If you try to fire him, I will defend Mr. O'Grady at the next Board meeting," Mrs Roberts stated emphatically

Desmond stayed at the school for ten more years. He later married his precocious student.

My team teaching partner, Angela Volpicelli, also showed how little she feared the administration. Angela and I always ate lunch together in the school cafeteria. She loved to talk about anything at lunch that wasn't related to school. She enjoyed conversing about her husband Alfredo's passion for soccer or her sweet bedridden father-in-law.

One day, Dr. Stanley Haas, the headmaster, came into the cafeteria. "Angela, I want to talk to you about one of your students."

Angela politely answered, "I never talk about school business while I am eating lunch, Dr. Haas. If you want to make an appointment with me during my conference period, I will be available." Dr. Haas was stunned by her answer, but he didn't argue. At OSR, the teachers had the power!