

Reflections on PDK's Professional Development Tour of Italy

By Terri Palmiero

From our arrival at the Domus Sessoriana Hotel in Rome to our departure from the Fiumicino Airport, this was the trip of a lifetime! As I review the photos that were captured during our short stay, I continue to marvel at the beauty and rich history of the country. Neither the photos nor the illustrated history books I've seen do it justice. "While in Rome, do as the Romans do." So, when we visited cultural and historical sites in Rome, we walked and we walked and we walked. Then we walked some more! Our bus driver was a gem and he always brought us as close as he possibly could to the various sites and museums. We had a wonderful guide whose tours provided highlights of ancient Rome: the Colosseum, ruins of the Imperial and Roman forums, a view of the Arch of Constantine, and Palatine Hill. The second day we were there, we were treated to a walking tour of the Pantheon, the Piazza Navona, Trevi Fountain, and the Spanish Steps. The cultural highlight of the third day was our guided tour of the Vatican museums, the Sistine Chapel, and St. Peter's Basilica.

The professional development aspect of our stay in Rome included a visit to the Angelo Mauri School, a public state school that uses the Montessori method in its kindergarten and primary school, as well as a meeting with the director of educational policies and reform and the coordinator of the commission of new national programs at the Italian Ministry of Education.

Some highlights of the Angelo Mauri School included a strong philosophy of inclusion, an apparent commitment to collaborative decision making, and the use of organized learning materials that were made of high-quality wood and were very tactile. The teachers were quite passionate about their mission and the children appeared to be highly engaged, collaborative, and empowered. We had the opportunity to approach the children, as well as to observe them. I was struck by their attitude of enthusiasm and ownership. For example, there were various groups working together at tables, seemingly unassisted by their teacher. They were extremely involved in the project at hand as they worked together and listened to each other. It was obvious to me that they were very much at home in their environment.

On the fourth day, we departed for Reggio Emilia via the rolling hills of Tuscany. I kept clicking my camera as fast as I could to capture as many gorgeous scenes as possible! Reggio Emilia is famous to educators for its Reggio approach to early childhood education. For gourmet cooks, it is best known for its balsamic vinegars, cheeses, and hams. We had some time when we arrived to stroll through the city, visit the shops and landmarks, and view local works of art. We were on our own and our group needed to visit the local bank to exchange our dollars for euros. The cashier and I had a good laugh. He wrote down the amount he would give me in exchange and I put my head down on the counter as I pretended to cry. That day, the dollar was worth 65 cents.

The next day, we visited the Loris Malaguzzi International Center for an overview of the Reggio approach and to see their exhibition. The session was very informative and

detailed. Briefly, the governance is private with a shareholders' assembly made up of 60 partners, with 54% of the shares owned by the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, a Board of Directors, and a Board of Auditors. It was interesting for me to compare and contrast this approach by primary school teacher and psychologist Loris Malaguzzi (1920-1994) with that of the public Montessori school that uses Dr. Maria Montessori's method. Malaguzzi's intent was to, I think, educate the total child to the greatest extent possible. To read the poem *The Hundred Languages* by Malaguzzi, go to www.innovativeteacherproject.org/reggio/poem.php.

On our last day, we visited Florence for a few hours. Friends had talked about the Galleria dell'Accademia and Michelangelo's famous *Captives* and the colossal statue of *David*. I could have spent five days in that museum and the city of Florence. The art was absolutely fantastic! Florence is also a great place to buy wines, cheeses, vinegar, leather gloves and handbags, and jewelry.

In addition to the professional development and the sites we visited, it was great to meet with and exchange ideas with colleagues, reunite with people I have met through other PDK International professional development tours, and have interesting conversations and encounters with Italian citizens. Last, but not least, the food was fantastic!

Terri Palmiero is a PDK life member in Utica, New York, who traveled with fellow PDK members to Italy November 3-10, 2007.