

# INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ITALY. A CASE STUDY

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**Abstract-** Historically speaking, the origin of the inclusive education model in Italy could be traced back to the promulgation of the Italian Constitution in 1948. Many years later, in 1977, the Parliament approved an important piece of legislation known as *integrazione scolastica*: according to this policy, all students can be enrolled in public schools regardless of any physical or mental impairment. As a result, the Italian policy context seems to create an ideal situation for the development of inclusive education and of a human rights approach to education. Does such perception correspond to reality? Our paper will briefly outline the historical evolution of the Italian model of inclusive education and present its current state of development. Clearly, inclusion works in reality not only as a result of legislation and procedures, but also depending on the will, dedication and investment of each school institution, on the context in which it operates, on the competence and motivation of its teachers and staff. In our paper we chose to present the case study of Istituto Tecnico Agrario Statale (ITAS) Garibaldi, a vocational high school in Rome, considered a best practice at the local and national level for the success of its inclusion projects. After describing the environment and the challenges faced from the viewpoint of *integrazione scolastica*, we will try to emphasize its peculiarities and to highlight the factors and managerial choices that, in our view, contribute to the excellent results of this institution in the area of inclusion.

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**Index Terms**—inclusion, education, *integrazione scolastica*, disability, special educational needs.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Historically speaking, the origin of the inclusive education model in Italy could be traced back to the promulgation of the Italian Constitution in 1948. Many years later, in 1977, the Parliament approved an important piece of legislation known as *integrazione scolastica*: according to this policy, all students are welcome into public schools regardless of any physical or mental impairment. At the same time, special schools have been almost completely dismantled [2]. Whenever the Italian policy context is compared to other realities in Europe, where special schools are sometimes the only available options for students with disability, it seems to create an ideal situation for the development of inclusive education and of a human rights approach to education. Does such perception correspond to reality? Experts have different opinions on this matter. In this paper, we will try to discuss strengths and weaknesses of the Italian inclusive education model, referring to the most relevant literature. Then, we will present a successful case of school inclusion that we observed in Rome, where policies and practices work in synergy with high motivation of the managerial staff, dedication of teachers and availability of material/environmental resources.

In Section II the concept of “inclusion” in education is analyzed from an international perspective, mentioning some landmarks in its evolution over time and the many different meanings given to it in the current debate.

Section III describes the historical evolution of the Italian model of inclusive education and the factors determining it, while Section IV describes its current state of development and the main roles in school, such as that of the support teacher, explaining their

importance for the realization of inclusion. Finally, Section V describes the context of ITAS Garibaldi, a vocational high school in the city of Rome, focused on agriculture and farming. Being well known for the success of its integration policies, this school is an interesting case study to observe how legislation and policies need to go hand in hand with staff and teacher motivation to make inclusive education a reality.

## II. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FROM AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

### A. Meanings of inclusive education

In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights established in its article 26 that the right to education is a human right [12]. This sentiment has since been echoed in countless intergovernmental acts. For example, article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities required states to recognize the right of people with disabilities to receive education and defined how this should be done in an effort to foster “the full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth”, “the development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential” and ultimately to enable “persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society” [13]. In recognizing the right of people with disabilities to an equal education, the article requires that people with disabilities would not be excluded from the general education system. It similarly puts forth the necessity that “effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion” [13].

The necessity to provide equal access to regular

schools is similarly espoused in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Actions on Special Needs Education [11]. This in Chapter I, Art.7 put forth the concept that schools must be able to meet the needs of all students in order to be fully considered inclusive education environments:

“The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school” [11].

Since Salamanca, an increasing number of international and intergovernmental institutions has been suggesting that inclusion is the key principle through which equality in education can be achieved. Although this principle is widely shared among experts, policy makers and educators, there is still lack of consensus about the real meaning of inclusion and its concrete implications in terms of policies and practices [2]. As a consequence, there are many different conceptualizations of the notion of inclusive education. One of them concerns the provision for children identified with special education needs and how the settings that they are put in for their education can respond to the different needs. An additional widely held perception of the idea of inclusive education concerns the education for all - EFA movement aimed to guarantee basic education to all pupils. This sentiment has been expressed in numerous governmental decrees, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child [14, Art.28] and the subsequent United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, which stated that all children, regardless of disability, should be entitled to the same education opportunities “in an integrated setting”[15]. Recently, the interpretation of inclusive education has been changing, going beyond the support to be provided for specific categories of pupils, to incorporate the study of how educational contexts should evolve to welcome the diversity of the student population [2]. According to this concept of inclusion a process of reform must take place on a grand scale, rather than merely focusing on individual cases or specific categories of needs:

“Inclusive education is not merely about providing access into mainstream school for pupils who have previously been excluded. It is not about closing down an unacceptable system of segregated provision and dumping those pupils in an unchanged mainstream system. Existing school systems in terms of physical factors, curriculum aspects, teaching expectations and styles, leadership roles, will have to change” [1, p.84].

In this perspective, inclusive education is seen as a process of reform in the sense of restructuring the education system in general to one that is more capable of responding effectively to the needs of all students. This means that, rather than putting the emphasis on access and equality in relation to students with impairments or disabilities, systemic educational amendments must be made in the interest of all students. Moreover, it is essential for the idea of inclusive education to be looked at not as a static condition, but as something evolving and changing. Inclusive education can therefore be defined as “[...] the educational principle that aims at transforming education systems and creating more equal and just societies. It is concerned with all of us and suggests possible routes to make radical educational and social changes. It fights against political, social, economic and cultural barriers that hinder the participation of all students in the process of learning regardless of their biological conditions, social and economic background and ethnic origins” [2, p.27].

While there are, in the current international debate, many different interpretations as to what the term inclusion refers to, it is clear that inclusion in education is a human rights issue and should be a priority across the world. It is important that education systems are transformed to create more equal and just societies, in which differences are celebrated, rather than simply tolerated [1].

### **B. Policy implications of inclusion**

Due to the widely varying viewpoints and interpretations on the meaning of inclusion in education and the various contexts in which it can be applied, there can be different approaches to inclusion, evident both in policies and practices:

- 1) A “radical” approach, well represented in the Italian model, that strongly supports the dismantling of segregated schools for those with or without disabilities and promotes education of all pupils within regular school settings.
- 2) A more “moderate” approach according to which for certain students with disabilities, ordinary schools could prove to be disastrous [16]. Due to this assertion, proponents of this approach support the maintenance of some special schools for students with profound learning difficulties and severe impairments.
- 3) A third approach referred to as the “UNESCO position”. The emphasis of this viewpoint is that inclusion doesn’t depend on where we educate children – whether in mainstream or special schools – but on how difference is addressed in educational settings. Thus, this method aims to reform schools in order to meet all students’ educational requirements. This vision does not deny the importance of special schools, being that certain needs of students with disabilities can be better addressed in special settings [2].

Here, two opposing perspectives emerge. One addresses the necessary provision of resources

depending on the pupils' needs and therefore supports the use of classification systems to ensure that such provisions are accounted for. An alternative perspective aims to eliminate these systems of classification out of fear that these systems will end up discriminating certain students based on such labeling [2]. As such, in efforts to facilitate inclusion in education systems, exclusion may ironically occur. It is through this unfortunate and unintentional result that differences, instead of being celebrated, begin to fade or are seen as discriminatory factors. This is the result of the process of trying to eliminate diversity by simply "fusing the abnormality with the normality" [10, p.136]. When resources are allocated to promote the inclusion of some students with disabilities into the mainstream education system, this likewise contributes to the construction of the identification of the disabled students as "outsiders".

### III. THE LEGISLATIVE PATH TOWARDS SCHOOL INCLUSION IN ITALY

#### C. Brief history of the Italian inclusive education model

The origin of the Italian inclusive education model can be traced back to the promulgation of the Constitution, whose enactment "represented a turning point in anti discrimination legislation" [2, p.6].

In fact, after a time in which the Fascist regime had denied individual freedoms, one of the most important goals of the new democratic government was to protect personal dignity and the right of minorities. Specifically, Article 3 of the Italian Constitution declares that:

"All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic or social nature which constrain the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organization of the country" (Constitution of the Italian Republic, 1948).

When speaking about school, it is also important to cite Articles 34 and 38. The first declares that schools are open to everyone. The second states that persons with disabilities are entitled to receive education and vocational training. Although the spirit of integration was already in the Constitution, it took a couple of decades for the Italian Parliament to start passing pieces of legislation specifically aimed to create an inclusive education system. Here below we summarize the most important steps in the legislative path towards the current inclusive model.

Law 1859/1962 reaffirmed the right to education for all students with disabilities, but in special classes (*classi differenziali*) for mild and moderate disabilities and in special education institutions (*scuole speciali*)

for severe disabilities. The logic of separation still prevailed in this law.

Law 118/1971 provided for students with mild and moderate disabilities the right to access mainstream compulsory education. Special schools were maintained for the most severe cases of disability. This law was still mainly focused on logistical issues, such as transportation, removal of barriers, financing, while it was not particularly concerned with pedagogical issues.

Law 360/1976 stated that blind students had the right to access mainstream compulsory education.

Law 517/1977 extended the right to access mainstream compulsory education also to deaf-mute students. The same law closed down all differentiated classes and schools and set out the principle that all pupils with disability from the age of 6 to 14 years should be included, supported by a specialized teacher (*insegnante di sostegno*) who works in conjunction with the health system operators and the classroom teachers to elaborate an individualized educational plan. Following this norm, the policy of *integrazione scolastica* was then implemented also in preschool (1982) and in upper secondary schools (1987).

Law 104/1992 (Framework Law for the Assistance, Social Integration and the Rights of Disabled Persons) is considered the milestone of *integrazione scolastica* [2]. It provided a detailed description of how people with disability were to be integrated into society, encompassing all sectors: employment, services and education. It underlined the importance of networking among institutional bodies and schools. It adopted a change of emphasis, from focusing on the individual deficit to the settings in which people live, taking into consideration societal and environmental factors. The principles of inclusive education are stated in Articles 12-16 specifically. In this norm, inclusive education is aimed to the development of a person's potential in learning, communication, socializing and in relationships, regardless of the type of disability.

#### D. Factors leading to *integrazione scolastica*

D'Alessio [2] explains the main factors leading to the implementation of *integrazione scolastica* in Italy, distinguishing them into four categories: historical-political, social-economic, pedagogical and religious.

Among the historical – political factors she mentions the influence of social protests by students and workers in the late '60s and '70s, inspired by an ideology of justice and equity. According to the author, the lobbying of associations for people with disability was not a separate voice, but part of a broader social movement which saw workers and university students campaigning together for justice and democracy for all social minorities. The years in which inclusive education started becoming real in Italy are also known as "the leaden years" because they were characterized by political conflicts between new fascist movements and radical communist forces,

both fighting against the State, that needed to provide a response for this tense situation. This might have been the reason why it gave in to many social demands and passed welfare assistance policies, in an attempt to control opposing forces.

As far as social and economic factors are concerned, in the years of post war reconstruction integration policies were seen as a way to promote the development of capitalism. In this view, providing education for all meant maximizing the potential of labor forces and the education system was considered as a crucial tool to create social cohesion and a productive working force to boost the economic revival.

Italy has a strong pedagogical tradition and the importance of pedagogical studies was also a crucial factor that paved the way to *integrazione scolastica*. As a matter of fact, this policy was influenced by the work of important scientists and pedagogues such as Montessori and Don Milani in Italy, Dewey, Piaget, Itard and Séguin - among others – worldwide. They contributed to the development of educational theories supporting inclusion, challenged the traditional idea of learning as a one-way transmission of knowledge and questioned the concept of “in-educability”.

Finally, some religious factors might have also had a role in the passing of the Italian inclusive legislation. The Catholic Church played an important role in creating the dominant ideology of inclusion and solidarity and always sought support from educational institutions to establish its role. The Christian Democratic Party ruled the country for over 40 years and, as a result of its long alliance with the Catholic Church, “somehow the Church was incorporated by the State so that they could both maintain their hegemonic power against opposing forces” [2, p.19].

#### IV. INCLUSIVE EDUCATION, ITALIAN STYLE

##### E. Organization

As a result of the legislative path towards school inclusion described in the previous paragraph, today in Italy nurseries, schools, universities and any other education institution, including private ones, have the obligation to accept pupils with disabilities. Moreover, all children with a certification of disability have the right to be supported in learning by a professional. When law 517 was passed in 1977, all differentiated classes and special schools were closed down and specialized support teachers started to work in the public schools. They are supposed to work in conjunction with the health system operators and the classroom teachers to elaborate an individualized educational plan for each pupil who has a certification from the local public health unit. They support *alunni con sostegno*<sup>1</sup> in their didactic and socialization

process, as well as the discipline teachers to facilitate dialogue and integration of the students with disability in the class.

##### F. Types of special educational needs (SEN)

In Italian schools there are three different categorization for students with special needs.

*Alunno con sostegno* is the student whose parents formally requested a certification and a support teacher. The request is based on a medical diagnosis of mental or physical disability.

A second case of special need is described by the acronym DSA. DSA stands for *disturbi specifici dell'apprendimento*, that is specific learning impairments such as *discalculia*, *dysgraphia*, *dyslexia*. The difference between this case and the previous one is that DSA can be certified by any doctor, not necessarily by the local public health unit. Therefore, we can say that a lower level of formality is required to have this type of recognition, but there always need to be a request by the family.

Finally, a third type of special needs is called BES, *bisogni educativi speciali*, special educational needs. In this case, there is no role played by the family in requesting additional support, but the decision is made by the school, based on linguistic, socio-economic and/or behavioral difficulties. BES students may have different kinds of disadvantage, not certified by health institutions [6].

##### G. Didactic implications

Only when a pupil possesses a statement of disability can he/she be assigned an *insegnante di sostegno* for a number or hours per week decided by the school and based on funding allocated by the Ministry of Education. In this case, we use the term *alunno con sostegno*. Differently, students who are certified as DSA or BES are responsibility of all teachers together with the *insegnante di sostegno*, if present in the class. As far as didactic organization is concerned, while *alunni con sostegno* are assigned a specific Individualised Educational Plan (PEI, *Piano Educativo Individualizzato*), that is a very detailed document containing medical information, results of behavioral observations and pedagogical reflections/guidelines, DSA and BES students have a Personalized Didactic Plan (PDP, *Piano Didattico Personalizzato*), a sort of “contract” between the family and the school, regulating expected actions and behaviors to reach educational goals [4; 6; 7; 8].

For the *alunni con sostegno*, there can be three different types of PEI depending on the residual ability: *programmazione di classe* (class planning) means that the student follows the same syllabus as the other students in the class; *programmazione semplificata* (simplified planning) refers to minimum requirements established for each discipline, while *programmazione differenziata* (differentiated

<sup>1</sup> *Alunno con sostegno* is a student with disability whose family has required a certification from the local public

health unit (*Azienda Sanitaria Locale, ASL*). Only with the certification it is possible to request a support teacher.

planning) indicates that the school has to prepare a syllabus ad hoc for the student.

### H. Roles

As previously mentioned, the *insegnante di sostegno* is a support teacher whose role is described in Law 517/77. It is important to mention that he/she should not be considered as assigned to a student, rather as assigned to a class to foster mutual understanding among students and teachers. The support teacher is therefore a crucial component of the school staff and he/she contributes meaningfully to the creation of a positive environment and climate for inclusion.

There are three other roles to be mentioned. The *assistente specialistico* (specialized assistant) is assigned to the student, or to more than a student, depending on the needs, and has the responsibility of helping in the practical everyday life and socialization activities, removing the obstacles that the student faces due to his/her impairments and working towards his/her autonomy and independence. The *assistente di base* (basic assistant) is assigned to students who are not self sufficient and is in charge of all physical needs, such as ensuring that the student can move inside the school buildings, helping him/her to use the bathroom, to eat, etc. An *assistente alla comunicazione* (communication assistant) might be assigned, for example, to a deaf student and in this case he/she will need to know the sign language in order to be of help.

### V. CASE STUDY: ITAS GARIBALDI

ITAS Garibaldi is a vocational high school in the city of Rome, focused on agriculture and farming. It is well known and has become a benchmark for school integration practices, both at the local and national level. Over a long period of time, we conducted direct observations, we interviewed the headmaster, Prof. Sapia, who has been in charge for over 10 years now, and some key staff members, we spoke with the families of students with and without disabilities, with the aim to understand why and how inclusion practices are particularly successful in this environment. As a result of our investigation, we came up with a SWOT analysis that we will briefly discuss here below.

Out of more than 900 students enrolled in ITAS Garibaldi in the year 2016-2017, about 120 are certified *alunni con sostegno*, about 150 are *alunni DSA* and about 20 are *alunni BES*. As Prof. Sapia, the headmaster, observes, the high number of students with disabilities and special needs is not perceived as an obstacle to high quality teaching and learning for all students. Rather, over the years, the school management has been very effective in communicating to all families the importance of inclusion and solidarity. Moreover, the school management has been able to demonstrate that having many students with special needs doesn't necessarily imply modifying the syllabi of the courses, decreasing the level of skills and competence. On the contrary, the

need for individualized planning translates into a better trained teaching staff and a wider variety of educational opportunities offered to all students. In this sense, inclusion at ITAS Garibaldi seems to achieve what Barton has called "celebration of difference" [1, p.80]. We believe that much of this result depends on the strong will of Prof. Sapia, the headmaster. His role in shaping the profile and the practices of a school that he wants to be really inclusive is remarkable. His sensitivity towards all types of disability and special educational need is clear when he talks.

The school is located just outside the city center and has its own 80-hectar farm, with vegetable gardens, greenhouses, fruit trees, an olive tree grove and a vineyard. There are also horse stables where a private company offers horse-back riding classes. Animal breeding is one of the main activities of the farm, that produces and sells fresh cheese and milk. Vegetables, olive oil and meat are also sold through institutional channels. At a first sight, the school appear as the ideal environment for experiential learning and for establishing connections between what is taught in class and the real farming work. The headmaster believes that the physical environment itself, the natural resources, the presence of a real farm and the availability of professionals such as farmers, breeders, vets and biologists, is among the first internal factor that positively impacts on the effectiveness of inclusion practices. In fact, having these unusual resources has made individualized planning more realistic. The school adopts a policy where individualized planning considers the capabilities of each student, clearly indicating which courses he/she can attend and which ones, on the contrary, would be unsuitable or too challenging. These are then substituted with field activities. Step by step, over the five years, the students acquire more autonomy and the number of hours in class can be increased. If a student with disability doesn't attend a class, he/she will not have a final grade. In some cases, it might be necessary to prolong the permanence in school, in order for the student to acquire more autonomy and independence. Spending a longer time in school is often seen as detrimental for students without disability, on the contrary it is an opportunity for students with disability, as it gives them more chances to become independent, preparing for the end of their education and their integration in a work environment. Another important factor for the success of inclusion at Garibaldi are the students themselves. Peer support is crucial for the wellbeing of students with disability or special needs. Teachers and staff are very careful to transmitting a message of solidarity and creating an inclusive environment. As Ianes [5] observes, peer involvement is one of the key factors for the success of school inclusion and the staff at ITAS Garibaldi strongly believes in this principle. Having the collaboration of peers means creating a network of positive relationships around each student with a

disability. This network grows and strengthens over the five years of school. It even has the potential to last after school and become a second family for the student. Every year, ITAS Garibaldi gives a prize to the student who, aside from his/her academic merit, has been more proactive and generous in supporting other students with disabilities or any kind of difficulties. The prize itself is not what motivates the students to be inclusive, but it is an effective way to communicate that being supportive is as important as being academically proficient.

Finally, the teaching staff and the specialized assistants are also an important factor, thanks to their motivation, availability to collaborate and implement the management's inclusion choices. In particular, the headmaster has made some recruiting choices that differentiate Garibaldi from other schools. Usually, the assistenti specialistici belong to social cooperatives and the schools entrust a cooperative to deliver the service. This way, the assistente specialistico receives less than half of the salary that he/she is entitled to, since the rest goes to the cooperative. Differently from this common arrangement, Garibaldi hires each assistente specialistico directly, allowing him/her to receive a competitive salary and positively influencing his/her motivation.

Among the external factors that favor inclusion, the headmaster and many members of the staff cite the neighborhood. The school area is open to the public: anyone can enter and visit the farm, watch the animals, buy vegetables and the other available products. There is no fence and no limitations for the public to wander around and share the life of the school and the farm. This openness and movement of people fosters socialization and contrasts, ideally and practically, the idea of "isolation" that sometimes surrounds people with disabilities.

Let's now mention the weakest points emerged from our interviews and observations. Although the Italian laws for school inclusion are considered advanced, when we spoke with the staff we realized that the legislative framework can at times be also a source of constraints and limitations. Bureaucracy obliges headmasters to determine all staff needs before the beginning of the school year. Sometimes, a new or newly identified need comes up, but the Ministry of Instruction doesn't respond, leaving the school without the necessary human resources to face it. In a highly regulated environment like that of Italian public administration, flexibility is scarce. Few people are available to take responsibilities on themselves, and the strict regulation often become an "excuse" to protect the status quo and to favor conservative choices. Moreover, the Italian Constitution affirms that the State is responsible for educational inclusion, but the amount of resources invested for this goal has been decreasing over the years and appears as always insufficient.

All in all, the case study of ITAS Garibaldi shows how

the same legislative framework can produce different outcomes, depending on how ingrained the concept of inclusion is in the minds and hearts of people who operate in an educational context.

A real, concrete dedication to inclusion, together with the capability to "think out of the box" (where the box could well represent bureaucracy and strict regulations) and make "unusual" managerial choices seem to be the recipe at ITAS Garibaldi.

## CONCLUSION

Each educational challenge is unique. There are no standardized procedures and rules that educators can rely on in order to solve educational issues. Rather, "the sources of educational science are any portions of ascertained knowledge that enter into the heart, head and hands of educators and which, by entering in, render the performance of the educational function more enlightened, more human, more truly educational than it was before" [3, p.39]. More so when there is a need to include "weaker" individuals, it is extremely important to be aware of dealing with many unique cases.

In exercising an educational function, management, teachers and the support staff need to work on a synergy of heart, head and mind. As Mortari emphasizes, "sensitive attention is not intellectual, but participatory; it is attention of the mind and of the heart" [9, p.35]. We believe that this is the essence of the inclusion practices at ITAS Garibaldi and the main reason for their positive results. Given that the Italian legislative framework has aimed to *integrazione scolastica* since the early '70s, successful inclusion cannot happen in real contexts without full participation of all people involved and without a strong will expressed by the management.

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