CHAPTER THREE

Inclusion in Italy: What Happens when Everyone Belongs

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Two decades after the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in the United States in 1954, the 1970s marked a watershed decade for policies ensuring the right to education for children with disabilities. Like the United States, which passed Public Law 94–412 in 1975 (reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA in 1990), Italy also enacted progressive, groundbreaking laws affecting students with disabilities during this time. What distinguishes Italian educational policy, however, is its early implementation of full inclusion—beginning more than twenty years before the *Salamanca Statement and Framework of Action on Special Needs Education* (UNESCO, 1994), which called for the universal implementation of inclusion. In this chapter, I highlight the major differences between the Italian and U.S. inclusion policies and practices. I then review relevant research on teacher attitudes regarding inclusion. Finally, I share insights from observations and interviews with teachers and administrators conducted during a month-long study of inclusion in Italy. I conclude with lessons that U.S. educators can take away from the Italian approach to inclusive education.

A TALE OF TWO COUNTRIES: INCLUSION IN ITALY AND THE UNITED STATES

In the 1970s Italy began passing important legislation assuring the right to education for students with disabilities. In 1971, for example, National Law 118

guaranteed the right to a public education for children with disabilities in general education classes. Circulare 227, which was passed in 1975, stated that the severity of disability could not be used as a reason to prevent integration. Finally, in 1977, Italian National Law 517 outlined specific guidelines for including students with disabilities in general education classrooms—reforms that were instrumental in transforming all of education in Italy. For example, National Law 517 reduced the maximum size of an integrated (or inclusive) class to twenty; limited the number of students with disabilities per class to no more than two; and, integrated special services for students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The law, in addition to abolishing special classes and special schools, also ended the practice of ability tracking (Berrigan, 1988), which has been linked to multiple and long-standing forms of educational inequity (Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997).

In the United States, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 stipulated that eligibility for services and determination of an appropriate educational placement were to be made on the basis of a clinical evaluation of the child. A team of professionals, in consultation with the parent(s) or guardians of the child, was entrusted with the task of considering the most appropriate placement among a continuum of service options.[1] Placement options ranged from the general education class to special school placements, although most commonly they involved special classes organized around particular disability labels for either part or all of the school day. Although the concept of *least restrictive* in the U.S. policy seems to ensure a range of choices, it functions in such a way as to legitimize restrictive placements (Taylor, 1988). Thus, by codifying the idea of *least* restrictive, the law simultaneously suggests that a certain degree of restrictiveness is necessary and appropriate. In the decades following the passage of this law (later renamed IDEA), scholars began to document and question the overrepresentation of students of color and the restrictiveness of their placements (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002; Wang, Reynolds, & Walberg, 1986).

While the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94–142) guaranteed a free and appropriate public education in the *least restrictive environment*, Italian Law 118 (1971) went a step further by specifying the right of children with disabilities to be educated *in regular classes*. Thus, while the U.S. policies created and then maintained a dual system of general education and special education, the Italian system merged and transformed the two into an entirely new system of education. Because of their early implementation, Italy has long been regarded as a model for inclusive education by such agencies as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). As

Zambelli and Bonni (2004) contend, Italy is an example of an "advanced model of inclusion" (p. 352). They write that embracing inclusion has meant, "above all, accepting difference and operating in such a way that these [differences] are not transformed into injustices" (p. 351).

Another important aspect of the Italian system of inclusion is the *sostegno,* or support teacher, who serves as a partner to the general education teacher. Roughly equivalent in training to a dual certified teacher in the United States, the *sostegno* is assigned to a whole class, not to an individual child. He/she collaborates with the regular education teacher, modifying curricula as necessary and providing instructional support for all children in the classroom. The *sostegno* does not have a separate classroom and typically is assigned to an inclusive class from six to twenty-two hours per week. His or her caseload is generally between two and four students, although a caseload of two students is more typical (Cornoldi, Terreni, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 1998). It is important to note that only students with significant learning needs are identified in Italy—students with learning disabilities, for example, are not labeled. In the United States over half of the students identified for special education services are labeled learning disabled (LD). In Italy, any additional services required by students with dyslexia or other learning disabilities are served using a consultation model or by the *sostegno* who is assigned to the class. When asked why students with LD were not identified, Giancarlo Cottoni (interview) replied, "Dyslexia is a *real* disability… [but] we expect variation in speaking, writing, reading, etc." A teacher outside of Rome commented that any teacher "worth their salt" should be able to support a student with a mild learning disability (personal conversation). Because of the educational background and instructional role in the classroom, the *sostegno* is a fully certified co-teacher and therefore *not* comparable to the paraprofessional in the United States. Compared to the United States, paraprofessionals are used infrequently in Italy; they work primarily as assistants to students with physical needs (such as toileting or feeding supports); they are not given instructional roles (Palladino, Cornoldi, & Vianello, 1999).

The blurring of responsibility between the *sostegno* and general education teacher in the Italian model of inclusion departs significantly from typical arrangements between general and special educators in the United States. In fact, when observing inclusive classrooms in Italy it is very difficult to determine which teacher is the general education teacher and which one is the *sostegno*. This is quite intentional. I found that if you inquire as to which teacher is the *sostegno*, your question may well be met by sly grins from both teachers or they might simply ask you to guess! It was obvious that the teachers I met in Italy prided themselves on sharing responsibility for all students in the class and did not see the need to differentiate their roles.

Despite the fact that co-teaching has been associated with increased academic achievement and greater access to the general education curriculum (Walsh & Jones, 2003), this level of co-teaching is much more rare in U.S. classrooms, where special education teachers often function more like teacher aids, playing only ancillary roles to the *real* classroom teacher (Magiera, Smith, Zigmond, & Gebauer, 2005; Walsh & Jones, 2003; Wood, 1998). As Magiera et al. found in their study of inclusive secondary mathematics classes, special education teachers are most often given the task of monitoring student progress or assisting individual students. Special education teachers in inclusive classrooms almost never take a primary role in delivering instruction to either small or large groups of students. Moreover, many general education teachers in the United States defer much of the responsibility and accountability related to students who receive special education supports to the special education teacher, who they see as the experts on such matters. Special education teachers participate in this relationship by shielding the general education teacher from any specific educational responsibilities for the child (Wood, 1998). In this arrangement, the general education teacher and special education teacher maintain very discrete roles and responsibilities in the classroom. Nonetheless, as Walther-Thomas, Bryant, and Land (1996) argue, when co-teaching is most successful, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between general education and special education teachers or to identify which students are labeled.

To summarize, the Italian system of inclusion was marked by the immediate, widespread integration of students with disabilities beginning in 1971. This initial period, from the passage of National Law 188 and continuing until the passage of National Law 518 in 1977 is often referred to as a time of *integrazione selvaggio* or "wild integration." As Nora Ferro, an administrator in Rome commented, the movement went forward without us knowing all the answers. "We were convinced of the rightness of integration and if we waited to know all the answers, we might never have begun and meanwhile lives were being wasted" (Berrigan, 1995). Insisting that despite criticisms from some special educational professionals and disability-related organizations, Ferro argues that any social change requires very strict implementation. She advises that change takes effort and even pain, because systems seek to preserve the status quo. She suggests, that if Italy had not been as strict in implementing inclusion, "the old paradigm would have prevailed" (Ferro, interview).

Conversely, in the United States inclusion progressed in an incremental fashion by maintaining a continuum of educational settings and implementing inclusion gradually. Moreover, rather than national guidelines for inclusion, placement decisions in the United States continued to be made in a more individual or case-by-case fashion. The result of these two different approaches is clear. Whereas

virtually all students with disabilities in Italy are educated in inclusive classrooms, the so-called push for inclusion in the 1990s has not led to widespread inclusion in the United States or elsewhere. In fact, Vislie (2003) finds that instead of seeing a fostering of more inclusive educational settings, we have actually seen a "reproduction of special education paradigms and rituals" and an expanding system of special education (p. 30) in countries outside Italy. In other words, despite the contention that there is a growing international consensus about every child's basic and fundamental right to be included (UNESCO, 1994) we have not gained much ground in implementing such policies (Vislie, 2003).

So, the question remains, how do teachers in Italy view this sweeping educational policy? Have their attitudes changed over the thirty years since these laws were enacted? In other words, how is it going?

TEACHER ATTITUDES: A SHARED PHILOSOPHY AND COMMITMENT

There have been several studies of attitudes of Italian teachers (general education and special education teachers) and parents toward school inclusion of students with disabilities. These studies, based on survey research, report an almost universal preference among Italian teachers for inclusive classrooms. Cornoldi et al., for example, researched teacher attitudes twenty years after first implementing inclusion. In a survey of 523 teachers in ten schools in northern and central Italy, researchers found that teachers expressed overwhelming support for inclusion. In fact, fewer than 5% of the teachers they surveyed disagreed with inclusion. Teachers reported that they saw positive gains in academic achievement and social skills, as well as increased autonomy of students with disabilities. They also found that nondisabled students gained a great acceptance of diversity. Teachers in this study, however, reported a need for better materials and resources and more time allotted to support teachers in the classroom. Similarly, Balboni and Pedrabissi (2000) sent a questionnaire to 1,325 parents, teachers, and support teachers. They found that both general education and support teachers favored inclusion, but that special education teachers were the most supportive of the policy. Of all the factors they analyzed, it was found that having direct experience with disabled students led to more favorable attitudes toward inclusion for both parents and teachers. Italian teachers, according to Balboni et al., "are very much in favor of inclusion and extremely willing to accept disabled students in their classes" (p. 149).

Studies of teacher attitudes toward inclusion in the United States are more mixed. Several studies report over half of their respondents holding negative attitudes toward inclusion (Van Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2000–2001) or predicting

that inclusion will not succeed (Monahan, Marino, & Miller, 1996). Mastropieri and Scruggs (2001) synthesized twenty-eight studies and find that although the majority of teachers in these studies support inclusion in theory, less than 30% report having adequate training or expertise to implement inclusion. Schrumm and Vaughn (1995) reviewed eighteen studies conducted in a five-year period and report a similar lack of training as a major obstacle for implementing inclusion. In a study of 326 graduate and undergraduate preservice teachers enrolled in a survey course on disabilities, Shippen, Crites, Houchins, Ramsey, and Simon (2005) find that although the course lessens prospective teachers' reported levels of anxiety and hostility toward having students with disabilities in their class, these gains are only marginal for general education teachers. As several reports demonstrate, knowledge and direct and sustained experience with students with disabilities leads to greater confidence and greater confidence leads to a more positive attitude toward inclusion (Meijer et al., 1994; Van Reusen et al., 2000–2001). Other studies have found that administrative support, collaboration, and shared vision are also key predictors of positive attitudes toward inclusion (Villa & Thousand, 2003).

From the beginning, teachers and administrators in Italy believed that inclusion would yield benefits to everyone (Berrigan, 1988). Today many believe that inclusion has led to much progress and that there are "many more opportunities for people with disabilities" as a result (Patrizia Ridella, interview). Giancarlo Cottoni (interview) explained that although they knew that inclusion would add complexity, they felt that such complexity would lead to an improved society and a richer experience for everyone. Certainly the Italian approach put into practice many of the key factors associated with successful inclusion that are outlined by Lipsky and Gartner (1998), including visionary leadership, parental support, and collaboration of key constituents. In addition, they collectively "bought into" inclusion as simply the right thing to do. Finally, subsequent inclusion policies took into account many of the concerns that teachers had about including students with disabilities by changing the nature of supports and the way they were organized, as well as making necessary adjustments to the way general education classrooms were configured by lowering class size, limiting the number of students with significant learning needs served by any one classroom, and facilitating team teaching. Thus, inclusion in Italy is not simply a *special education* policy; it represents a complete restructuring of the educational system as a whole.

With these findings in mind, in the late spring of 2003, I traveled with a group of students to Italy. We visited schools in Rome, Florence, and Parma. Besides wanting to see how this policy was being implemented, I was very much hoping to find out from teachers themselves how inclusion was going and what they thought about it.

AN ETHIC OF FULL PARTICIPATION: THE CLASSROOM AS FAMILY

What was most remarkable in visiting Italian classrooms and talking to teachers, administrators, and even cafeteria workers was the almost seamless vision about the "rightness" of inclusive education. A common theme that emerges when talking to educators and administrators in Italy is that inclusion is a "moral issue, which is more important than a legal mandate" (Berrigan, 1988). In general, I found that most teachers and administrators that I met talked about inclusion, not so much in terms of civil rights, but rather as a moral imperative. Moreover, teachers often described the classroom as a family or a community (Nutbrown & Clough, 2004). When asked why they support inclusion for *all* students with disabilities, teachers I spoke to would often say things such as, "Of course we include everyone. You wouldn't push someone out of the family—why would we push someone out of the classroom?" I found as I traveled around the country that as Norra Ferro explained, inclusion in Italy has become "rooted, [it is now] very routine" to the point that it is almost "taken-for-granted" (interview).

The schools I visited seemed to share an "uncompromising commitment and belief in inclusion" (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004). They shared many of the values identified by Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) in their case study of three inclusive schools in England, Portugal, and the United States. Like the school leaders and teachers in their study, Italian teachers and administrators made it known that everyone was valued for their individuality. When teachers described students, they often did so in very holistic ways, discussing their difficulties, but also their creativity, their social skills, their energy, enthusiasm, or playfulness. As a preschool teacher in Parma explained, "We now think differently about the disabled child. We think of disability only as difference—not as deficit or lack. Each child is respected as a whole and unique individual" (interview). They shared a commitment to teach everyone that seemed to be unwavering.

Although the shared vision and the legal aspects of inclusion in Italy are unparalleled, in practice there are always challenges that remain. As Giancarlo Cottoni (director of a research center in Parma) explained, Italy has "a perfect law," and the task now was to grow into these laws—to "adjust ourselves to this perfection" (Cottoni, interview). He described full inclusion as a utopian ideal that they keep in their sight—"although we may never arrive at perfection, we continue to walk toward it." According to Cottini, one of the biggest challenges is the lack of sanctions for schools that are not implementing inclusion adequately or appropriately.

We observed other tensions regarding the implementation of the law. Some of the people we talked to commented that disability-specific accommodations,

such as Braille and sign language, were not adequately met by support teachers, who were more globally or superficially trained (Maragn, interview). This lack of disability-specific training led some parents to send their children to private schools for the blind or deaf, where they would be sure to receive training in Braille and sign language. This tension over communication rights was brought into high relief when our group met at a renowned high school for the arts in Florence a support teacher for Deaf [2] students who did not know sign language. Despite the fact that we were obviously taken aback by this revelation, she did not seem to view this as a problem and implied that if she signed to Deaf students it would "isolate" them socially. Of course, this was a clear example of how even in what appears to be a very successful climate of inclusion, there remain areas of exclusion that must be continually addressed. Elena Radutzky, the director of the Mason Perkins Deafness Fund, provided some important background to this issue of communication rights. She said that as in the United States, sign language was banned in Italian schools in the 1880s. She also explained that there is a long-standing cultural valuing of speech, which is evident by the Italian saying, "gesture kills the word." Although sign is not yet considered an official language in Italy, for the first time lawmakers are consulting with disabled activists, and parents are pushing for guarantees that all Deaf children will be given communication assistants in their classes. However, it remains a continued struggle in Italy (and in the United States) to find support teachers who have adequate training in sign language or Braille. Thus, despite the fact that Italy leads the world in inclusion, it must be considered an unfinished mandate as long as students who are deaf or blind cannot be guaranteed full communication rights.

Anna DeMela, an administrator in Florence, also cited support teacher shortages and increased immigration in Italy as continuing challenges (interview). Italy, like the United States, also struggles with issues such as school failure, dropout rates, irregular attendance, and behavioral problems. In the 1980s, only thirty out of every hundred Italian students who entered school finished their high school education. In recent decades, dropout rates have been reduced and now 79.5% of students are attending upper secondary school and 65.3% are earning their certificate compared with only 8% in the 1980s (Beccegato & Elia, 1998). Problems such as dropout rates and behavior issues, however, are not typically characterized as individual student problems, but rather as evidence of school breakdown and failure to fully engage students (ibid.). As Cottoni (interview) remarked, it is not the child that must adapt to the school, but rather it is the school that must adapt to meet the needs of the child.[3] Thus, proposed solutions are often about how the school must change to better reconnect with the child (ibid.).

Others spoke of problems students with disabilities faced finding well-paid jobs, despite the fact that Italy passed a law in 1999 that requires businesses to hire

at least one person with a disability for every fifteen nondisabled employees. The government also offers incentives such as tax breaks and salary reimbursements for businesses that hire individuals with more significant disabilities. It is too soon to know about the impact of this law, but in 2000, the Italian government began following the progress of students with disabilities after high school.

Finally, teachers in both U.S. and Italian contexts often report the need for more resources and training (Balboni & Pedrabissi, 2000; Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormic, & Scheer, 1999; Cornoldi et al., 1998; Shippen et al., 2005; Van Reusen et al., 2000–2001). A key difference is that in schools with a strong inclusive orientation, teachers and administrators show a willingness to struggle with these imperfections and their commitment to inclusion is sustained through such difficulties (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004). In other words, resources are not used as an excuse for why schools cannot include students, but rather a way to further support their efforts to support all students. This was certainly true in the schools that I visited; there seemed to be an understanding that "inclusion is always evolving" (DeMela, interview).

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Despite inevitable imperfections, there is much to learn from the Italian approach to inclusion. First, beyond simply implementing a generic policy, the Italian model demonstrates the importance of fostering a shared vision that resonates within a particular cultural context. Whereas U.S. disability policies tend to focus on civil rights, for example, the Italian teachers I spoke with, framed inclusion in terms of an ethic of care or concern—viewing the classroom as a family where everyone is valued and belongs. The model of inclusion in Italy is consistent with a strong familial orientation of Italian culture and heritage. In their study of three inclusive schools in England, Portugal, and the United States, Kugelmass and Ainscow (2004) found that these kind of shared values were often communicated in a public way through slogans or displayed visually throughout the school. The lesson here is that policymakers would be wise to consider framing (and even marketing) educational policy in ways that resonate with specific cultural values and ethos to foster more "buy in" from teachers and other school personnel. In other words, while someone operating from a civil rights-based orientation might see the lack of access to sign language as violating Deaf and blind students' communication rights, policymakers might get further in Italy by thinking about how denying someone access to disability-specific communication systems isolates them from meaningful integration and a sense of belonging to the group. This practice also puts the onus

of adapting on the child to adjust to nondisabled modes of interaction rather than adapting the context to welcome disability-specific ways of communicating.

Another lesson we can draw by contrasting the U.S. and Italian approach to inclusion is the limited effects of incremental change. Simply looking at the differences between the numbers of students included in Italy compared with the rest of the world suggests that there is a huge difference between incremental approaches to educational reform adopted outside Italy and a full inclusion, no excuses model within Italy. Whereas 99% of students with disabilities are included in Italy, the majority of students in the United States, for example, continue to spend significant portions of time in resource rooms and self-contained classrooms, despite the fact that both countries adopted disability-related educational policies in the 1970s.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Italian model demonstrates the need for policies that account for the whole educational system, rather than a single population or aspect of reform. As Wedell (2005) notes, inclusion policies often aim only to "soften the blow" (p. 4) of rigid and inaccessible educational systems, rather than transform those very systems to be more welcoming of all learners. Instead of simply including students into the same educational structures that excluded them in the first place, we need to examine what it is about our educational structures that are failing more and more students each year. We would do well to think about inclusion as a way to support the full range of diversity in our schools, including race, ethnicity, language and class differences, as well as ability. By enacting inclusion policies whose scope was more wide-reaching—focusing on lowering class size, instituting models of co-teaching, and limiting the number of students with special needs included in any one class, the Italian policy transformed the whole educational system in ways that was beneficial to everyone. This also may account for parent's general support for inclusion. As one *sostegno* remarked, "Parents of nondisabled children see inclusion as adding to the quality of the class," not taking away from it.

Perhaps the central idea is that the Italian and U.S. models began with a different starting point. As Giancarlo Cottoni said in a meeting with my students, we begin with the idea that the "child is fine and that it is the school that needs to remediate itself" (Cottoni, interview). Thus, he explained, the object of remediation is the classroom, not the child. The philosophy of inclusion that I heard expressed by all the administrators, teachers, and early advocates of inclusion, such as Cottoni with to whom I spoke echo key tenets outlined in the *Salamanca Statement and Framework of Action on Special Needs Education*, which was adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education in 1994. This framework, adopted by ninety-two governments and twenty-five international organizations establishes *every* child's right to an inclusive education as the most effective way to combat discrimination and build a more inclusive and welcoming society. The framework asserts that each child is unique and therefore differences in characteristics,

interests, and abilities among learners should be expected and accommodated. In other words, as Cottoni would certainly agree, learning environments should be "adapted to the needs of the child" rather than some "preordained assumption" or norms (UNESCO, 1994, p. 7). This is certainly a different starting point from the prevailing U.S. model, which is more steeped in a medical model view that locates the deficit within the child (Wedell, 2005, p. 5)—a view of disability that is ultimately "dysfunctional to the realization of inclusion" (Vislie, 2003, p. 30).

NOTES

1. Although the law was designed to ensure parental participation and collaboration, in practice parents are rarely seen or treated as equal partners in the process.
2. Many people within the Deaf community use a capital (D) when referring to aspects of Deaf culture or Deaf identity and lower case (d) when referring to deafness as an impairment. In this paper I will use a capital when I am referring to Deaf students and lower case when I am speaking of deafness as an impairment.
3. As one of the editors of this book rightly pointed out, if the school fully adjusted to the child it would support the disability-specific communication needs of children who are deaf or blind, rather than expecting a deaf or blind child to function without full communication rights.

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