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CASES/TRENDS

Inclusive education in Italy: Historical steps, positive developments, and challenges

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Abstract The Italian school system has a long tradition of inclusive education, starting in the 1970s with the first experiences of integrating students with disabilities into regular schools. Since then, legislation has developed to guarantee students with disabilities and other special educational needs the right to individualization and personalization. This article presents the main developments in Italian inclusive education, documenting both positive outcomes and ongoing challenges, especially those which could be of interest for international readers. The article is structured around three relevant themes: the persistent influence of an individual-medical model of disability on school practices; support opportunities and additional resources for inclusion; and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and their role in the improvement of the quality of inclusion.

Keywords Inclusive education · Italy · Disability · Teacher competences

In this article, we investigate the main developments and challenges of inclusive education in the Italian school system, utilizing the available research data to present positive innovations, critical challenges, and potential developments. Specifically, we highlight issues of both national and potential international interest, based on the main trends emerging in legislation, research, and practice. In each section of the article, we consider the continuous interplay of innovative and systemically inclusive policies and practices with a traditional (and narrower) understanding of inclusion, one based on the medical model of disability in entitlement and special education perspective in provisions.

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Research data and evidence on the benefits of Italian inclusive school system

The normative foundations of the Italian school system are based on its Constitution, which attributes great importance to the role of the public state in removing all barriers that may limit personal development or the opportunity to participate in social activities (Art. 3). The Italian school system was conceived of as free and compulsory for everyone (Art. 34). Up until the 1970s, students with disabilities were excluded from this "school for all", but in conjunction with the development of the Basaglia de-institutionalization movement (Basaglia 1968), schools began to welcome pupils with disabilities. Legislatively, this development was supported by laws on "Integrazione Scolastica" (school integration) (Law 118/1971; Law 517/1977).

Being included in school for all had a strong impact on persons with disabilities. A survey conducted in 2007 and 2008, which compared different age groups in a sample of 1877 persons with disabilities, revealed that their school careers are gradually getting longer (Canevaro, D'Alonzo, and Ianes 2009). For example, only 38.9% of the cohort born 1970–1974 reached upper secondary school, while this was the case for 70.8% of the cohort born 1985–1989. Moreover, the research highlighted a connection between school career length and the perceived quality of adult life. Specifically, respondents (persons with disabilities or their families) were asked to evaluate (on a scale of 1–10) their workplace satisfaction, confidence in the future, and perceived normality of their social life. Findings showed a significant association between longer school careers and higher values for all three variables of life quality (Canevaro, D'Alonzo, and Ianes 2009; Ianes, Demo, and Zambotti 2014).

The long experience of "Integrazione Scolastica" has also produced some benefits on teachers' attitudes. One of the first relevant studies, conducted in 2000 with 560 teachers, revealed positive attitudes towards the integration of students with intellectual disabilities in the majority of the considered variables (Balboni and Pedrabissi 2000). More recently, a survey of 7,700 newly hired teachers showed that the large majority of them saw the presence of students with disabilities as enriching the class climate and as an opportunity for their own professional development (TreeLLLe Association, Caritas, and Agnelli Foundation 2011).

Finally, the presence of students with disabilities in Italian schools seems to have led to some positive developments for *all* students in terms of teaching methods. In one of our studies (Ianes, Demo, and Zambotti 2014) we asked more than 3,000 teachers from all school grades to describe their everyday work with classes that include students with disabilities. The results showed that the presence of students with disabilities seems to be connected to a pluralization of teaching methods. Teachers were asked to complete an online questionnaire focusing on one class they worked with and, in that class, on one student with a disability. By means of multiple choice questions, they described the way teaching and learning was organized in the class and indicated if the pupil with a disability (a) attended all school hours in the class together with his/her classmates, (b) did so partially, or (c) was always outside of the class, for example in a specific support room.

The respondents reported different teaching methods for classes where pupils with disabilities were always in class and those where they were not. In fully inclusive classes, a larger variety of teaching methods were used with greater frequency. Even when the most widely used methods were teacher-centered, as in the other classes, student-centered methods such as cooperative learning or active laboratory settings were used more frequently in

the weekly routine of these classes. This result suggests that the presence of a student with a disability supports the use of a variety of teaching and learning settings. While this variety is often crucial to create a setting that allows students with a disability to participate, the pluralization of learning situations can also be seen as a quality criterion for universal learning and teaching for all (Hall, Meyer, and Rose 2012).

Interestingly, other results from the same survey cautiously indicate that learning and socialization results were better in classes where the enrolled student with a disability was always in class with their classmates, regardless of the seriousness of the disability (Ianes, Demo, and Zambotti 2014). In fact, based on teachers' evaluations of learning and socialization outcomes, both for the students with disabilities and for their other classmates, fully inclusive classes obtain significantly higher results than classes where students with disabilities are pushed out for some or even all school hours. Even though these results are based on teachers' self-evaluations and not on observed performance, the larger variety of teaching and learning methods seem to correlate with positive outcomes for all.

Other research projects show how the presence of students with disabilities in inclusive learning environments has led to the use of instruments, methods, and approaches developed in the field of special education or even in therapeutic settings. For example, a recent project by Agrillo, Zappalà, and Aiello (2020) reframed the Denver Model for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders within the Italian inclusive system. The research outlines the importance of both support and classroom teacher training for putting the Denver Model into practice, as well as the importance of rooting that training in teachers' everyday school practices (for example, using counselling for practice instead of classical lessons). This kind of research contributes to the development of an inclusive school culture, in which students with disabilities have both the opportunity to share their learning settings with all classmates and at the same time receive the specific support they need. Furthermore, the use of a range of special education methods and instruments seems to have interesting potential for all students. A project that investigated the efficacy of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) interventions, for example, has demonstrated that using books with AAC symbols produces interesting language learning effects, not only for children with complex communicative needs, but also for other children (Vago 2014).

Eradicating the influence and pervasiveness of the individual-medical model of disability

The Integrazione Scolastica policy developed in the 70s has doubtlessly positively affected some aspects of the Italian school system. Nevertheless, the way entitlement and provision were designed was strongly rooted in an individual-medical model of disability that still remains visible, even in recent legislation, and slows down innovation in this field.

From disability category to a large SEN macrocategory: Equity and/or labeling?

The initial school integration laws of the 70s granted two important preconditions for an inclusive school system: the placement of students with disabilities in mainstream education and the right for *all* students to attend the same school under the same roof. As soon as everybody's presence was ensured, the spotlight turned to the quality of all students' school careers, both in terms of learning and participation. Ultimately, this led to legislation that aimed to protect some categories of students who seemed more exposed to risks

of exclusion and underachievement. First, Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) were granted for all students with a certified disability. From 2010 onwards, other regulations were approved in order to support other categories of pupils by means of an IEP: first those with specific learning disabilities (Law 170/2010) and later those with other Special Educational Needs (SENs). This included pupils with sociocultural disadvantages (Ministerial Directive of 27 December 2012; and Ministerial Circular no. 8 of 6 March 2013).

In national pedagogy circles, enlarging the group of specially "protected students" beyond students with disabilities has been discussed animatedly. The expansion of the SEN category seems to have a twofold meaning. If on one hand this choice seems to grant accommodations to all students who need them on an equity basis (Ianes 2005), on the other hand, making a difference in the classroom becomes "reserved" for students with SENs and risks labeling them, as is well known in the debate around labelling and special education (Algraigray and Boyle 2017). The debate ended with an ambiguous note, published in May 2018 (Note 1143, 17.05.2018) by the Ministry of Education's University and Research division, that promoted the idea of overcoming categorization and moving towards differentiated learning for all. At the same time, however, no SEN category was abolished and thus no concrete structural change was made.

Recent research on teachers' opinions about the enlargement of the SEN category show that they are mixed or critical. For example, findings from 3,087 Italian schools (37% primary, 28% lower secondary, and 35% upper secondary), collected by means of an online questionnaire filled out by the school's inclusion coordinator—a position held mainly by teachers—offers an insight into these mixed opinions. A positive view seems to prevail: 57.9% of respondents completely agreed that "[t]he SEN legislation is making progress towards a more inclusive school for all" and 53.9% totally disagreed that "[i]n general, the SEN legislation has produced more negative than positive effects". At the same time, however, more than 40% of the sample recognized the responsibility of the SEN legislation for strengthening labelling dynamics and, in any case, almost 20% of respondents tended to see more negative than positive effects (Bellacicco et al. 2019).

A further qualitative research project centered around semi-structured interviews with 41 inclusion coordinators, support teachers, and headmasters in four Italian regions: Liguria, Lombardia, Piemonte, and Sicilia (Dovigo and Pedone 2019). The critical perspective of this study highlighted the risk of enlarging the SEN category from two points of view. Firstly, if teaching and learning are conceived as standard processes with some accommodation made for students with certain difficulties labelled as SEN, then diversity does not lead to system changes, but merely to special interventions and resources for specific groups of students. Secondly, interventions are based on a recognition of difficulties and needs, but this deficit-based point of view reduces the intervention to "help". This idea implies a passive view of students with SEN, reducing them to recipients of adjustments, instead of imagining forms of empowerment that engender "agency" (Dovigo and Pedone 2019). Research findings seem to confirm this emerging thesis. Missing methodological information, however, makes an evaluation of their reliability difficult.

Entitlement mechanisms for individualized provision

As discussed in the previous section, school legislation recognizes three main categories of SENs entitled to an IEP: disabilities, specific learning disabilities, and other special educational needs. The identification of students belonging to these three categories and the subsequent allocation of provisions follow different paths. Unfortunately, they seem to be

associated with a common negative cultural influence, pervasive and difficult to eradicate: the individual-medical model and its deficit view of individual functioning, which recurs to categorization and is likely to produce social labeling and stigmatization of some pupils.

The mechanisms for entitlement and provisions for students with a disability are defined by national laws. According to Law 104/1992, identification is mainly based on medical statements. Classes also attended by students with disabilities are assigned some hours of assistance from support teachers, specialized teachers who work along with class teachers. The number of support teacher hours depends on the severity of the diagnosed disability. The whole process of provision allocation is strongly medically oriented; in fact, it's the medical statement that establishes the individual right for an IEP and for the attended class to receive additional personnel resources. The strong connection between the medical statement and resource allocation might be one of the reasons for the constant growth (in the last thirty years) of the group of students recognized as having a disability, which is now between 3 and 4% in various school grades (ISTAT 2020).

Only recently, decrees D. Lgs. 66/2017 and D. Lgs. 96/2019 have introduced an innovative move towards a more relational model of intervention for students with a disability (Shakespeare 2013), by means of the adoption of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health ICF), as a reference model, both for assessment and for intervention (WHO 2007). This potentially weakens the impact of the individual-medical perspective. Indeed, the ICF approach allows detailed descriptions of the complexity and uniqueness of each disability condition and introduces a relational vision of disability, seen as the result of the interaction of individual characteristics and contextual aspects. This could lead to interventions that take into account all aspects of the student's school and extra-school life (i.e., relations, environments, attitudes, etc.), in order to develop interventions in a systemically planned IEP.

Likewise, in the case of students with specific learning disabilities, the individual-medical model is the basis of the entitlement procedure, based on a psychological diagnosis. The diagnostic procedure is defined at national level but applied differently at each regional level. In some cases, assessments carried out by private psychologists are recognized and in others not. This is one of the reasons why statistical data show a high variability in the percentage of students belonging to this category, from 4.5% in the Northwest to 1.4% in the South and Islands (MIUR 2018). Moreover, the percentages grow significantly from primary school (1.95%) to lower secondary education (5.4%). As described earlier, the assessment of a specific learning disability entitles students to differentiated learning methods, but no extra human resources are assigned to classes also attended by students who belong to this category.

Regarding the last category of "other SEN", it was conceived of as a sort of "residual category" for other diagnosable disorders that are not recognized by the other two categories (attention deficit disorders, hyperactivity, language disorders, etc.), but also for different forms of social disadvantage. For the latter, no formal diagnosis is needed: the law makes it the responsibility of the teaching team to decide whether the student has needs that require the activation of differentiation measures formalized in an individual learning plan. Also, in this case no extra human resources are assigned. The introduction of a non-medical category could have led to innovative practices, allowing teachers to assign the pedagogical point of view a crucial role in the identification of SEN. However, teachers' opinions regarding this issue are controversial, as shown in the research data presented in the previous section.

Based on Meijer's (2003) definitions of funding models for special education measures, Italy adopts an individual model of provisioning, through which provisions are allocated to

entitled students and the amount of resources depends on the student's type of SEN or the severity of their needs, almost always based on a diagnosis. The main risks of this model are well known. Firstly, it locates the problem within the child (labelling), with the risk of promoting the segregation of students with SEN. In Italy, for example, research has shown how students with disabilities in mainstream classes sometimes experience the phenomenon of micro-exclusion (D'Alessio 2011; Ianes, Demo, and Zambotti 2014; Nes, Demo, and Ianes 2018). Furthermore, the disability category may contain an overrepresentation of minority groups or students with socio-cultural, linguistic, or economic disadvantages, as shown widely in other countries (e.g., Walby, Armstrong, and Strid 2012). For Italy, data on students without Italian citizenship and with a disability statement confirm this concern (MIUR 2019). More research on this topic is therefore needed, particularly with reference to the overrepresentation of male students among all categories of needs recognized by Italian law.

Additionally, this kind of provision allocation produces incentives to formulate needs (Pijl 2014). Italian data seem to confirm this trend in the constantly growing numbers of students diagnosed as having a disability or a learning disability (TreeLLLe Association, Caritas, and Agnelli Foundation 2011). Lastly, there is an economic issue, as the growing number of learners with disabilities or SEN requires additional funding. In fact, the annual expenditure in education at a national level is constantly rising, even doubling with reference to support teachers (EASNIE 2019b).

To conclude, the latest expansion of Italian legislation in favor of different types of needs guarantees access to further resources and implements indispensable measures to guarantee the educational success of some students. Even if the system is acting more and more within a rights-based approach, trying to adopt a bio-psycho-social and relational perspective, the strong link between medical statements and allocation of provisions raises many issues and challenges, some of which deserve further attention in research.

Support mechanisms and additional resources for inclusion

Parallel to contradictions arising from the entitlement and provision processes, ambiguous trends in the way resources for inclusion are conceived also need to be discussed. These include some systemic, whole school development measures as well as very individual special provisions, such the specialized support teacher.

Teacher competences and roles: A special teacher for a special child?

In the Italian school system, for all levels of education there is a clear distinction between two main types of teachers: classroom/subject teachers and support teachers. As mentioned above, support teachers are assigned to classes that include students with a "certified" disability. By law, these two groups of teachers have different tasks but are considered equal in their responsibility for all the students in the class. Nevertheless, due to social and cultural mechanisms embedded in the pedagogical tradition, class or subject teachers are frequently given a higher status than support teachers (TreeLLLe Association, Caritas, and Agnelli Foundation 2011). But the number of support teachers continues to grow: as of AY 2017–2018, there were around 156,000 support teachers, representing 17.9% of all teachers (MIUR 2019).

In addition to critical legislative aspects, such as the previously discussed influence of the medical-individual model of disability, it is necessary to consider two main topics of debate at the national level: (1) the competences of the teachers and consequently their training, and (2) the collaboration and integration of roles and competences. The first issue is particularly broad and arises as an international challenge. In fact, many researchers still debate the relationship between general teaching competences and specific or "specialist" competences when it comes to teaching students with a disability. There has been much reflection on the way methods and strategies conceived and structured for special and separate contexts could or should be adapted to mainstream classes (e.g., Cottini and Morganti 2015; Ravet 2015; Norwich and Lewis 2007). In particular, those approaches belonging to the field of Evidence-Based Education (Mitchell 2014), which are recognized as being effective for specific disabilities such as Autism Spectrum Disorders, rarely offer evidence in relation to inclusive settings. Furthermore, the non-critical application of "special pedagogies" to the inclusive context could reproduce stigmatization and exclusion mechanisms (Rix 2015; Ravet 2011).

Despite its long history of including students with disabilities in mainstream schools, the Italian context is characterized by a peculiar debate around the issue of teacher competences. Due to strong criticism of the quality of special schools in the 1970s, the special and separate system was quickly dismantled. This led to the choice of training support teachers for mainstream schools in a broader way, with no specialization for certain types of disability (e.g., sensory disabilities or intellectual disabilities). These teachers were primarily seen as a support for organizing teaching in a way that made the integration of students with disabilities possible (de Anna 2015). The choice of unspecialized initial training for support teachers has been criticized by both scholars and advocates for people with disabilities. It raises doubts about the ability to guarantee adequate support for pupils with disabilities, especially in the last decade (Anastasiou, Kauffman, and Di Nuovo 2015).

Secondly, a difference in the status of support and class teacher roles led to some challenges for collaboration. Italian support teachers, unlike those in other countries, currently receive the same initial training that a class or subject teacher might receive, plus a 1-year specialization training on teaching in "integrated" classes. Theoretically, this choice could grant equal status of class/subject teachers and support teachers. In practice, however, the support teacher profession enjoys limited social recognition, being interpreted—even by the support teachers themselves—as a secondary role compared to that carried out by the class teacher. This in turn generates a lack of retention within the profession, as support teachers rapidly opt for the role of class teacher as these opportunities become available (TreeLLLe Association, Caritas, and Agnelli Foundation 2011).

The poor professional recognition of support teachers is also due to the fact that the resources made available are directly linked to student statements of disability. This carries the risk of support being mistakenly considered as an individual rather than a class resource. As a result, class teachers often delegate all the needs of those pupils with disabilities to the support teacher, as seen in other countries (Devecchi et al. 2012). To counter the reduction of the support teacher's role to that of a personal tutor for students with disabilities, in the last ten years a movement in favor of a mixed professional role has been developing: some promote the transformation of support teachers into part-time class teachers, with a mixed role, or into external support experts (Ianes 2015, 2016). This role development could improve collaboration on class planning between subject teachers and supports teacher, which seems to be limited in school practice, even if the law strongly supports it (Canevaro et al. 2011).

Given these challenges, the limits of the actual legislation become evident. Clear contradictions exist. On one side, the equal responsibility of all teachers for all students is emphasized, even to the extent of shared teacher training. On the other side, however, the fact that support teachers are assigned to a certain class because of the presence of a formally identified student with a disability generates challenges for a positive collaboration between teachers.

Specialist provision for inclusion

EASNIE (2019a) distinguished between in-school and external provision for pupils and students with disabilities. The first type of provision concerns the adaptation of curricula, conditions for evaluation, and learning materials, with additional access to supportive equipment and/or adult support. External provision refers instead to training or support offered by other professionals outside of the school, for example on assessment procedures or educational planning. The Italian school system, in both compulsory and non-compulsory education, offers both in-school provision and external provision to support students with disabilities, specific learning disabilities, or other special educational needs. The resources deployed are primarily human.

On a class level, the support teacher represents one of the main forms of support within classes where pupils with disabilities are present. In some cases of particularly complex disabilities, alongside with the support teachers, other professionals are also employed, the so-called "educatori" (educators) or "facilitatori all'autonomia e comunicazione" (autonomy and communication facilitators). They are typically financed by local authorities and constitute around 60,000 employees in Italian schools. Together with teachers, these professionals are involved in lesson planning, such as adaptation of curricula, learning materials, and student assessments. They are all part of the Operative Working Group ("Gruppo di Lavoro Operativo"), together with the family of the student with a disability and professionals in the health system. The major task for this group is planning the IEP. At the broader school level, one or more people coordinate aspects of support for pupils with Special Educational Needs and foster collaborations (e.g., the inclusion coordinator "referente inclusione" or SEN-Co. "referente BES"). These coordinators also lead the school's Working Group for Inclusion ("Gruppo di Lavoro per l'Inclusione") that is responsible for developing actions that promote inclusive culture and practices transversally across all school classes.

Schools are also part of networks, interacting with other consulting services, external to school institutions, which are expected to provide psycho-pedagogical advice and guidance to families, teachers, and schools (e.g., "Centri territoriali di supporto" or CTS; "Centri territoriali per l'inclusione" or CTI, as defined in C.M. 8/2013 and, more recently, Legislative Decree no. 66/2017). These services are, unfortunately, not consistent throughout the national territory, as they are also dependent on regional and local funding. In recent years, these types of provision have expanded in some territories, for example the consultancy services around Autism Spectrum Disorders ("Sportello Autismo"), which offer training and consultancy programs, especially for teachers, using a peer-to-peer approach (Munaro and Cervellin 2016). Lastly, the legislation fosters the creation of networks of collaboration between school institutions and external professionals, establishing multi-professional teams at a local level (i.e., "Gruppi per l'inclusione territoriale" or GIT) to support schools and teachers in inclusive planning.

Networks within the health system are less fragmented. The "Unità di Valutazione Multidisciplinare (UVM)"—a multidisciplinary evaluation unit—of the Local Health Districts ("Azienda Sanitaria Locale" or ASL) is a multi-professional team in charge of carrying out assessment procedures. Later on, some students with disabilities are regularly monitored by health professionals for specific rehabilitation programs (e.g., speech therapy, physiotherapy, etc.). Differently than in other countries with a longer special school tradition, only a few institutions for specific disabilities (particularly those for blind and deaf people) are still in operation and constitute resource centers for mainstream education.

Summing up, the opportunities for co-operation and collaboration between different stakeholders and the support resources provided by law are numerous, and they could allow for the implementation of adequate and multi-level provision for students with disabilities. Moreover, theoretically the different working groups established for the development of inclusive practices do not only act on behalf of single students with SEN in their classes. Many groups, such as the school working group for inclusion, are conceived of as places for the development of inclusion in a more systemic way. Rather than focusing solely on how to accommodate the needs of single students, they should look instead at school development as a whole.

There are still some debates, however, relating to the type of support offered (e.g., consultancy, in-service training for teachers, support for parents, etc.), professionalism, and specialized forms of support needed. An outstanding issue concerns the coordination and collaboration between different services and administrators, both public and private: among them are the Ministry of Education (MIUR), regional local authorities, public health system, non-profit organizations, and other private entities. Moreover, these intertwined relations strongly differ from one region to the other: territorial disparities exist regarding access to human resources, provision, and services, both within and outside of schools, due to the fact that 9.01% of funds are allocated at the regional level and 10.27% at the local level (EASNIE 2019b). Moreover, some services are the result of initiatives led by individual institutions and bodies affiliated with the public, and are available only in some territories.

Monitoring, evaluation, and research

As discussed by other authors (e.g., Ferri 2017), Italian legislation shows a significant commitment to school inclusion and contains ambitious and innovative proposals, especially with reference to students with disabilities. Despite the principles established at a legal level, the implementation is subject to criticism, particularly on the quality of the provision for students with disabilities and the effective application of a systemic approach to intervention. The available research data show that the quality of implementation is highly fragmented and patchy.

In line with international trends towards intra- and international evaluation of educational systems, starting around 2000, Italy also introduced monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for the quality of its education system. In addition to traditional assessment mechanisms regarding students' learning outcomes (e.g., PISA at the international level), further monitoring procedures were introduced, expanding the work of the main research and evaluation public bodies, including the "Istituto nazionale di documentazione, innovazione e ricerca educative" (INDIRE) and "Istituto nazionale per la valutazione del sistema educativo di istruzione e di formazione" (INVALSI) (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2017). New monitoring mechanisms have been introduced

by recent legislation (Decree 66/2017, Law 107/2015, C.M. 8/2013), which requires not only that documentation is produced on pedagogical-didactic planning for pupils with disabilities ("Piano Educativo Individualizzato") or with special educational needs ("Piano Didattico Personalizzato"), but also establishes institutional objectives in favor of school inclusion and the related self-assessment ("Piano Annuale per l'Inclusione"). Regarding monitoring mechanisms, the legislation also requires other documentation on pedagogical-didactic planning and self-assessment of the general education system ("Piano Triennale dell'Offerta Formativa", "Rapporto di Autovalutazione", "Piano di Miglioramento", etc.). In these documents, there are specific sections dedicated to the monitoring and improvement of inclusion, but – with reference to Kinsella's model (2018) – only indicators about structural and procedural aspects are considered.

In addition to a significant expansion of monitoring mechanisms around structural, organizational, and educational processes, two recent decrees (66/2017 and 96/2019) require the development and introduction of quality assurance mechanisms, to verify the effectiveness of the system in relation to the outcomes of all students. INVALSI is now committed to the development of indicators and descriptors for the outcomes of students with disabilities, both in terms of learning and social participation. However, the task is challenging because of the enormous variety of individualized learning goals defined in the IEPs.

Another separate but related issue concerns the production of research evidence and the relationship between research, policies, and consequent innovation of praxis. Research data on the outcomes of school inclusion and evidence on the effectiveness of the model are still too limited (Cottini and Morganti 2015; Begeny and Martens 2007), potentially leaving ample room for spreading skepticism (Ianes and Augello 2019). Although a certain level of satisfaction, especially regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities, was expressed by both teachers (Ianes, Demo, and Zambotti 2014; Reversi et al. 2007) and parents (Zanobini et al. 2018), the available results are still limited and raise some concerns, for example about social participation (Nepi et al. 2013, 2015). In order to evaluate the quality of the system, further research on students' outcomes and social inclusion are needed, both for students with and without disabilities and other special educational needs.

Indeed, the tendency in empirical research, as in national monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, is to focus on structural and process aspects, with a clear prevalence of descriptive studies that provide information on current practices or attitudinal ones that investigate the perspectives of teachers, pupils, and parents on disability and inclusion. Other approaches are less common, particularly research about the academic and social outcomes of students with and without disabilities or other special education needs, and about the efficacy and effectiveness of current practices and interventions (Cottini and Morganti 2015). This national shortcoming is, unfortunately, in line with some international trends in research on inclusive education (e.g., Amor et al. 2019). At both European and international levels (e.g., European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2017), the debate around evidence-based policy is widening. Research on the effectiveness of implementation and the gathering of evidence should support current policy appraisals and inform future policies as well, thereby affecting decision-making and implementation.

The strengthening of the interconnection between research, policies, and practices—using both top-down and bottom-up processes—is also an opportunity to allow greater involvement and active participation of different stakeholders, and to improve the dialogue between the multiple levels that characterize any education system (school, local, regional, national). Within the Italian school system, a first attempt towards this objective has been made by Law 107/2015, the formulation of which was based on a national

consultation involving different stakeholders. Currently, however, data from the above-mentioned research and education public bodies, together with university research and national statistical offices like ISTAT (which constitute the main source of statistical data and information on the functioning of the national school system), as well as the data collected through monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms, do not necessarily have an impact on policy and innovation.

Within this context, it seems necessary to foresee and implement further evaluation mechanisms, which create a circular link between research, policies, and practices. Firstly, this would verify the effectiveness of current implementation models and make known any good practices while also intervening in the critical aspects of the system. Secondly, this approach would increase the possibility of integrating knowledge and evidence derived from national and international research, not to mention the skills developed by professionals in the field, within policy-making processes and future implementation strategies.

Concluding remarks

The Italian school legislation has established the basis for a genuinely inclusive school system. Research data clearly shows the positive impact of this policy on the quality of life for persons with disabilities, on teachers' attitudes, and on the variety of teaching and learning methods for all students. Nevertheless, in this article we also highlighted three main issues of concern in the implementation of school inclusion in the Italian context, which are also particularly relevant at the international level. Specifically, the medical/individual model strongly influences both policies and practices (Shakespeare 2013), the contradictory provision system risks micro-exclusions and labelling, especially with reference to support teachers (Schleicher 2014; EASNIE 2011), and it is difficult to produce reliable research evidence and quality monitoring of school inclusion, which has significant consequences for future practice (Rocha Menocal 2020).

The Italian experience showcases a series of contradictions around disability-related issues. On one hand, the model seems to move towards a human rights approach, which addresses all human differences, and a bio-psycho-social model of disability (ICF) which takes into account the global functioning of the pupil with disability, considering both individual and social factors. On the other, the main reference for disability identification still remains medical. Moreover, the enlargement of the SEN categories, also mainly based on medical diagnoses, risks amplifying the phenomena of stigmatization and exclusion to justify the allocation of additional resources. These issues are underlined by teachers' mixed opinions on recent legislative developments (Bellacicco et al. 2019) and the coexistence of inclusive and exclusive experiences for students with disabilities (e.g., Nes, Demo, and Ianes 2018; Zanobini et al. 2018; Nepi et al 2013, 2015). For example, some phenomena such as push and pull-out from mainstream classes need to be further studied in order to understand their impact (Ianes, Demo, and Zambotti 2014; Nes, Demo, and Ianes 2018).

Another relevant topic concerns teachers' roles and competences, in particular the professionalism of support teachers. Research shows that half of support teachers do not feel like or are not perceived as "proper" teachers (TreeLLLe Association, Caritas, and Agnelli Foundation 2011). The debate is divided between those who want to strengthen the separation between careers and make the professionalism of the support teacher more and more specialized, and others who tend to promote more uniformity in the role of teachers while significantly expanding all teachers' inclusive skills. Both options, however, could be risky: the multiplication of delegation mechanisms towards specialist roles and consequent

phenomena of micro-exclusion on one side, or a tendency towards a constant increase in teacher training expectations on the other. Among these unsolved aspects, the fragmentation of the support system—both internal and external to school institutions—challenges collaboration and coordination. This suggests that research around organizing provisions in an alternative way is needed, from identification mechanisms to allocation of provisions and support opportunities.

Finally, the topic of quality assurance plays an important role. An investment in this direction could support a more even development of inclusion in Italy as a whole. The connection between inclusive processes and inclusive outcomes (Rocha Menocal 2020) should be strengthened, creating a link between research evidence, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms, with specific reference to students' outcomes, both in terms of achievement and social participation.

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