Inclusive Education in Italy

STUDIES IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Volume no. 10

Scope

This series addresses the many different forms of exclusion that occur in schooling across a range of international contexts and considers strategies for increasing the inclusion and success of all students. In many school jurisdictions the most reliable predictors of educational failure include poverty, Aboriginality and disability. Traditionally schools have not been pressed to deal with exclusion and failure. Failing students were blamed for their lack of attainment and were either placed in segregated educational settings or encouraged to leave and enter the unskilled labour market. The crisis in the labor market and the call by parents for the inclusion of their children in their neighborhood school has made visible the failure of schools to include all children.

Drawing from a range of researchers and educators from around the world, Studies in Inclusive Education will demonstrate the ways in which schools contribute to the failure of different student identities on the basis of gender, race, language, sexuality, disability, socio-economic status and geographic isolation. This series differs from existing work in inclusive education by expanding the focus from a narrow consideration of what has been traditionally referred to as special educational needs to understand school failure and exclusion in all its forms. Moreover, the series will consider exclusion and inclusion across all sectors of education: early years, elementary and secondary schooling, and higher education.

Inclusive Education in Italy

A Critical Analysis of the Policy of Integrazione Scolastica

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Printed on acid-free paper

DEDICATION

I would like to thank all the teachers, students and head teachers of the schools I visited, whose participation made this research possible and to whom this book is dedicated.

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FOREWORD

Inclusive education is a serious and contentious issue which increasing numbers of societies are attempting to address. The nature of the challenge and the degree of the complexities involved in seeking to gain an informed knowledge and understanding of such developments, is more demanding when set within a cross-cultural dimension. The task includes the exploration of historical, empirical and policy concerns and despite the extent of the work undertaken, we still have very little knowledge and understanding in relation to other societies.

Studies of particular societies are thus an urgent and fundamental necessity particularly if as, D'Alessio maintains we are to:

> ...attempt to shake the conscience from the lethargy of rhetoric and to open up dialogues and possibilities concerning different types of research that presuppose critical engagement and envision radical thinking. (p. 166)

This book, *Inclusive education in Italy: a critical analysis of the policy of integrazione scolastica*, by Simona D'Alessio, represents a new area of research in that it critically examines the historically ground-breaking Italian education policy of *Integrazione Scolastica* through the lens of the social model of disability, and the principles and practices of inclusive education. This policy was introduced in 1977 and led to the dismantling of special schooling in Italy – a policy which has been rightly celebrated in Italy as a liberating educational measure which allowed previously marginalised groups to attend their local community schools and to be members of ordinary classes. Surprisingly, this very radical education policy has received scant attention by researchers and by policy makers in the UK and elsewhere, although those who *do* make reference to it acknowledged that its progressive and historical significance. This book is, therefore, unique and important in critically exploring Italian policy which, for over thirty years, has offered a radical alternative to dominant western approaches in relation to education and disabled children and young people. This is of particular significance in the light of the UN Convention on Disability Rights and Article 24, which envisages the development of inclusive education, and the closing down of segregated schools, internationally.

A particularly innovative feature of this study is the importance given to historical context, and the theorising undertaken in relation to the particular political background against which the policy of *integrazione scolastica* emerged.

Furthermore, the book makes a significant theoretical contribution to the field of disability studies in education in exploring its central topic through the critical application of some key theoretical frameworks. The Social Model of Disability is used as an effective framework for critiquing individual deficit approaches and the Medical Model of Disability with reference to the Italian education context. Theoretical ideas drawn from Foucault and Gramsci are explored to critically examine Italian education policies and practices in ways which reveal the underlying impairment-led assumptions, power relations, and practices of categorisation which underpin

the education system which co-exist with the more visible and still radical policies and practices of *integrazione scolastica*.

This book makes an important contribution to our understanding in that it raises questions about the theoretical premises on which the policy of *integrazione scolastica* is founded, rather than examining the policy as an operational or purely technical project. It shows how, in spite of its very radical origins and aspirations, Italian policy in this area is based on a 'special needs' paradigm. A central argument which emerges from the study is that what was once a progressive policy has been transformed into a powerful hegemonic project of normalisation which reproduces micro-exclusions within mainstream settings.

The study is underpinned by qualitative research in which ethnography is the principle methodological paradigm used in the development of case studies. As an insider-researcher, Simona D'Alessio was able to gather rich data of different kinds. A particular strength of the research lies in the high levels of transparency and reflexivity which, she argues (convincingly), contribute to the validity, integrity and reliability of her study. The exposition and discussion of the methodology is one of the great strengths of the book. The principles and processes involved in the analysis of the data are lucidly explained and justified, and the outcomes critically discussed in the light of the research questions and the theoretical frameworks developed in the earlier part of the book. The quality of the data analysis is sensitive and rigorous, and theoretical arguments are developed cogently and convincingly from the data presented.

This study is potentially important in terms of the wealth of ideas and insights it provides for policy-makers, practitioners and other research users. For example: it illustrates the importance of engaging with contextual factors, including the historical and political, in order to understand and probe the rationale, processes and outcomes of education and social policy. It demonstrates a radical alternative to dominant perceptions about 'what is possible' in terms of policy making in relation to disability and education. It provides an original, illuminating and carefully crafted research project which will inspire and challenge other researchers in the field. Finally, it reveals some of the deeply-rooted barriers to developing inclusive policies, even when all children attend the same kind of school.

Inclusive education in Italy: a critical analysis of the policy of integrazione scolastica, is a valuable resource for all those interested in understanding the complexities involved in analysing the often contradictory ways in which values and discourses permeate policies in social life. It is a particularly important piece of work in relation to the study of disability and education, and makes a unique contribution to our understanding of the nature of cross-cultural research. This book is essential reading for all those interested in the question of the nature and purpose of education and its contribution to the realisation and maintenance of an inclusive, non-discriminatory society. We have found the book both a pleasure to read and a challenging educative experience.

Professor Felicity Armstrong
Professor Len Barton

INTRODUCTION

This book gathers the reflections emerging from a research study concerned with the nature and development of inclusive education in Italy. Drawing on the data collected during my doctoral study between the years 2004 and 2008, this book brings to the fore how well-established educational mechanisms may contribute to the perpetuation of forms of micro-exclusion in ordinary school settings despite official purposes of doing otherwise.

The book explores the extent to which the Italian policy of *integrazione scolastica* can be considered an inclusive policy. Its main purpose is to provide a critical analysis of a policy which has been in place for more than thirty years and which has been decisive in counteracting the exclusion of disabled students from mainstream settings. Anti-discriminatory legislation has been very prolific in Italy. This is particularly evident when considering that countries are currently ratifying the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) to end segregation of disabled students from mainstream settings whilst Italy had already made such a choice in 1977. Nevertheless, the book makes a case that the passing of legislation may not be sufficient to fully guarantee the participation of all pupils in the process of learning in ordinary classrooms. To address this issue, the book raises questions concerning the theoretical premises on which a policy is based and it challenges dominant interpretations of the notion of integration, its taken-for-granted principles, discourses and practices.

In the light of these considerations, and in order to investigate contradictions and complexities enmeshed within language and notions, I have chosen to maintain the Italian definition of *integrazione scolastica* throughout the book because I wanted to respect the definition used by original documents and research participants. Also, because words and their meanings change across time and place and it is difficult to translate a definition from one language into another without falling into the traps of personal interpretations or ambiguity. It is important, moreover, to reflect as much as possible, on the constraints and the national contexts in which words originate so that their fundamental meaning is not lost when it is transferred into another context with its own historical, social and cultural background.

Similarly, the meaning of inclusive education varies conspicuously across countries - even within countries themselves - and these differences in interpretation are derived from the complex interplay of historical, cultural, political and economic factors. For this reason, this book provides its own interpretation of the notion of inclusion. In most Western countries, many practitioners and academics that support inclusive education celebrate it as one of the most important educational imperatives of current education systems. Indeed it is usually considered, by those committed to equality, to be fundamental in the development of a human rights approach to education.

In the context of this book, inclusive education is interpreted as a process of transformation of education systems and cultures in order to allow all students to participate fully and equitably in the process of learning in regular schools. Inclusive education is not concerned with one specific group of people - such as disabled students - but

it engages with, and addresses obstacles that all learners, including disabled people, may encounter, in pursuing their right to education. However, exclusionary and discriminatory practices are more visible and more deeply rooted in relation to, for example, disability, gender, sexuality, race and the effects of poverty and social deprivation. For this reason, the focus of this book is on disabled people and on their struggle for a more inclusive education system. Nevertheless, it is important to underline that the study of inclusive education, as interpreted within this book, has got nothing to do with the 'inclusion of disabled pupils' in ordinary settings, rather it is concerned with the study of how contexts, settings, policy and practice could be made 'inclusive' by removing institutionalised and deeply embedded forms of discrimination that shape our society and education systems.

In order to investigate the extent to which the policy of *integrazione scolastica* can be considered an inclusive policy, the book draws on the application of the social model of disability as the main theoretical framework. Through the application of this model, the book argues that an educational policy should not be evaluated solely from an operational level, such as the articulation of political purposes (for example allocation of resources for disabled students) and their application at a school level, but it should also engage with issues of power relations, especially those operating within the process of policy making. Moreover, a sociological approach, as the one utilised in this book, brings to the fore the theoretical standpoints upon which policies and practices are embedded, thus portraying how different ideologies may impact upon practices and determine the availability of alternative solutions to existing barriers. Although different theoretical frameworks – such as medical/individual model versus social model or inclusion paradigm versus special needs education paradigm - may, arguably, be equally valid, they nevertheless focus on different aspects, providing different explanations and related solutions for similar phenomena, such as disability. The adoption of a sociological lens for the analysis of the policy of *integrazione scolastica* therefore contributed to the development of different understandings in relation to the education of disabled students in regular settings. It also influenced the modality of gathering data, and the type of data collected, suggesting alternative views to dominant ways of conducting research. Clearly, the social model of disability is also an attempt to draw on the experiences and perspectives of disabled people.

The social model used within this book also provides an effective framework to critique individual deficit approaches to disability. Under an individual/medical model in fact, the research focus usually leans towards an examination of individual deficiencies, and the modifications required to favour the 'integration' of a disabled child in ordinary settings. Consequently, observations do not focus on the individual experiences of disabled pupils, their development, the work of specialised teachers or the interaction between specialised teachers and the pupil with a Record of Needs, rather:

> Sociological analyses focus on the institutions that treat, house, and manage disabled people – including families, schools, hospitals, and rehabilitation clinics – and above all, they examine disability as a stigmatized social status,

exploring the means by which stigma is created, maintained, and resisted.
(Stone, 1984:3)

This book draws attention to the structural, cultural and educational constraints that require a disabled child to be certified and classified with a statement of special educational needs in order for him or her to be provided with the same learning opportunity as other non-disabled pupils. Observations are concerned with the organisation and structures of mainstream schools, general teachers and the consequences of adopting traditional forms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment for all pupils. Finally, a sociological approach looks for explanations that do not only concern the provision of special support for disabled children and the allocation of extra resources to schools. In contrast, they seek to understand why some children are considered less equal than others as they are required to adopt a 'special' identity in order to exert their rights to education.

Along with the social model of disability, the works of Gramsci and Foucault are fundamental to understand the intrinsic nature of mainstream schools beyond the enlightened vision of teaching and learning. Their works are relevant as both authors interrogated the conditions under which education systems operate and power is exercised. In particular, Gramsci suggests ways of looking at the sociological implications of education for the wider society. He also provides inputs to conceptualise the hegemonic quality of *integrazione scolastica*, a policy which misunderstood the means (such as integrating disabled pupils into regular classrooms), for its end (such as changing the education system). Foucault, on the other hand, suggests ways of questioning the reasons why societies need to adopt particular regulatory systems – for example naming, categorisation, classification and labelling – as a means of understanding and of controlling particular social groups. His works identify discourses that perpetuate exclusionary attitudes and practices in the school setting. Drawing on these thinkers, this book invites researchers, teachers, educators and policy makers to critically interrogate their assumptions and practices by detaching their actions and behaviours from their immediate contexts – classrooms, local education authorities and schools – and to consider their consequences.

Unless the structure of mainstream schools is made problematic, pedagogical and organisational innovations linked to *integrazione* are destined to fail or to remain at a very superficial level. What is crucial is to develop an understanding of the different theoretical premises supporting inclusive education on the one hand and *integrazione scolastica* on the other hand. This book is an attempt to do so especially by drawing particular attention to the historical and political contexts in which the policy of *integrazione scolastica* emerged.

THE BOOK RATIONALE

When I first set out to conduct the main study, a traditional way of interpreting *integrazione scolastica* and of conducting research concerning this policy inevitably influenced my work. I did not want to deny or undermine the achievements made by *integrazione scolastica*, nor did I want to underestimate the importance of the 'good practices' that paved the way to the social integration of disabled people in

universities and work places. Therefore, my original purpose was to understand how this policy could lead to the development of inclusive education within the Italian education system. Most particularly, I wanted to observe how *integrazione scolastica* operated in two schools perceived as being good exemplars of 'good practices' and potentially situated in an 'inclusive' context. Yet, despite the passing of *integrazione*, some students, in particular disabled students, were still facing some forms of discrimination and marginalisation in the schools in which I worked as a support teacher. Therefore, I was strongly motivated to understand the possible reasons for the perpetuation of these forms of discrimination. Put simply, I wanted to understand why some contradictions and tensions were still in place within a major liberating policy initiative, which had allowed previously marginalised sections of the population to be educated in ordinary settings. Although the policy of *integrazione scolastica* is considered a fundamental standpoint in the development of inclusive education in Italy (Canevaro, 2002; Ianes, 2005), and is often perceived as a synonym for inclusion (Canevaro, 2001; 2002; 2006), many contradictions arise that need to be analysed and explored. This book also results from the efforts made to address such issues and provide them with an explanation.

At the end of 2004 I began the process of seeking permission to conduct research in two schools located in the north-eastern part of Italy, a region that most Italian commentators identified as one implementing 'inclusive' policies. Among the different provinces I decided to conduct my research in a small town, which for ethical reasons I will not identify by its real name but by the pseudonym of *Adriazzurra*. The choice of site for my study was not due to convenience or proximity but it was determined by my study objectives (Walford, 2001). I soon concentrated on the analysis of this policy initiative and of the school practices that could be considered conducive to inclusion.

After a few weeks of fieldwork, I realised that I was conducting my research with the assumptions that the policy of *integrazione scolastica* was not only an unproblematic anti-discriminatory policy, but also that it was an 'inclusive policy', although under a different name. Gradually, by engaging with the works of social model activists (Oliver, 1990), social theorists (Gramsci, 1971; Foucault, 1977) as well as policy analysts (Fulcher, 1989; Ball, 1990; Ozga, 1990; Armstrong, 2003), I became aware of the complexity of the notions of policy, disability and policy making and I started challenging my own presuppositions, and context-embedded assumptions alike.

Consequently, I decided to disentangle my study from traditional research modalities that have characterised the analysis of the policy of *integrazione scolastica* so far. A review of the Italian literature regarding *integrazione scolastica*, shows that despite the passing and the application of this groundbreaking policy, very little research has been conducted in the field of *integrazione* at a national level (Maviglia, 2008). Indeed, some Italian scholars (Canevaro & Ianes, 2001; D'Alonso & Ianes, 2007) have conducted studies concerning this policy, but they have primarily focused on a description of local practice of *integrazione scolastica*, without providing any relevant empirical findings concerning the outcomes of this major policy decision for society, schools and most importantly for the life of disabled

pupils. What emerges instead is that most Italian research investigated whether the policy of *integrazione scolastica* – mainstreaming of disabled pupils in regular settings - was being applied or not. Yet, researchers did not seem to question the rationale that drove forward the passing of *integrazione scolastica*, beyond the humanitarian idea of 'doing good' to 'vulnerable' groups. Furthermore, there did not seem to be any attempt to question this policy, especially in the light of new social, economic and political challenges, such as the application of neo-liberal theories to education and the pressure on raising the standards of schools that modern education systems face today.

Interestingly enough, research in the field of *integrazione scolastica* in Italy seems to have focused primarily on issues concerning the legal application of this policy at a school level by safeguarding the allocation of an adequate quantity of resources and specialist support. A relevant example of this type of research can be found in the questionnaire developed by the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education, Training and Teaching known as *INValSi* to measure the level of implementation of the policy of *integrazione* scolastica in state schools (InValSi, 2005–2006). What emerges therefore is that, firstly, traditional research has essentially aimed to provide evidence of how *integrazione scolastica* has had a positive impact on the learning of disabled people in ordinary settings, especially when compared to the education taking place in segregated settings (Cornoldi and Vianello, 1995; Vianello, 1999; Nocera and Gherardini, 2000). Secondly, it has produced indicators necessary for the evaluation of the quality of technical and administrative arrangements – such as the number of support teachers - that foster the implementation of 'good practices' of integration (Canevaro, Cocever and Weis, 1996; Nocera and Gherardini, 2000; Canevaro and Ianes, 2001; CDH Bologna and CDH Modena, 2003; Ianes and Canevaro, 2008). Thirdly, it has examined processes of diagnostic assessment based on new categorisation procedures as a basis for a re-distribution of resources (Ianes, 2004; 2005). Fourthly, it has suggested ways of developing special didactics and pedagogy to facilitate differentiation of teaching and individualisation of learning (de Anna, 1997; 2003; Canevaro, 2006; 2007). Recently, an attempt to break from a research tradition that measures the quality of *integrazione* based on the numbers of disabled people enrolled in regular schools has been made by two national research projects. The first project is a national survey for families with disabled children (D'Alonso and Ianes, 2007). It investigates further the consequences of the policy of *integrazione scolastica* for the families of disabled people thirty years on from its enactment. Yet it fails to investigate the policy of *integrazione scolastica* beyond the framework of the old debate which measures 'inclusion' by opposing segregated education to integration and it still focuses on the experiences of disabled students, without questioning educational contexts and systems or examining the theoretical underpinning in which the policy is still rooted. The second project consists of a ministerial programme, known as I CARE (*Imparare, Comunicare, Agire in una Rete Educativa*), which seeks to strenghten the process of integration of disabled pupils in regular schools by focussing on the work of teachers and local stakeholders. The preliminary empirical findings of this national survey provides an extremely valuable picture of the current situation regarding the application of

the policy in Italy and of the attempts to bring innovation and action research within the school setting.

During my fieldwork, therefore I was faced with the following dilemma:

> While inclusive practices were to be found…it was easy sometimes to lose sight of these amid the exclusive practices and cultures. It is the latter that we inevitably see more of, but the former that we really need to address. (Nind et al., 2005:202)

Thus, although inclusive features were to be identified, my focus gradually sharpened to become an analysis of those barriers that could prevent the development of inclusive education in the schools under investigation. This shift of focus was due to the fact that the study of inclusion inevitably encapsulates the study of exclusion and how the latter is materialised in policies and practices (Booth, 2000). My study was not concerned with measuring the effectiveness of its application according to predetermined categories and standards, rather it interrogates why this particular policy initiative was being enacted rather than a segregating one and what were the theoretical underpinnings of such a policy when compared to those of special needs education.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In order to investigate the level of 'inclusiveness' of the policy of *integrazione scolastica*, the book interrogates the nature and the development of this major policy initiative using three strands of analysis. Firstly, a historical analysis of the conditions that led to the enactment of this policy. This strand of analysis provides an alternative reading of the policy of *integrazione scolastica* by examining the theoretical premises in which the policy is embedded. Secondly, a policy analysis that investigates milestone documents, legislative measures and the discourses deployed within them. Such an analysis provides relevant information about how the notion of disability has been constructed and how such a construction may determine the perpetuation of mechanisms of micro-exclusion. Thirdly, an empirical data analysis based on the accounts (e.g. interviews, observations) of how this policy is implemented in schools.

The following chapters therefore engage with discourses and practices as they emerge from documents, empirical data, and the use of a specific language that is concerned with the social construction of the notion of disability. Chapter One provides an overview of the uniqueness of the Italian context and it examines the historical development of the policy of *integrazione scolastica*. The focus is upon the conditions that led to the enactment of this policy and on the analysis of alternative accounts of how the policy came into place. This chapter also seeks to shed light on potential links with the notion of special needs education that have gone unnoticed for many years. Chapter Two provides a general description of the concept, and of the policy of inclusive education and of how a different concept-ualisation of inclusion has influenced both the theoretical underpinning and data

collection of the study. Much of the discussion concerning inclusive education is about an international interpretation of the concept of inclusion and its current interpretation within the Italian literature investigated for this study. Chapter Three questions the reasons for adopting a social model of disability as the main theoretical underpinning used to investigate dominant assumptions and perceptions concerning the education of disabled people. The social model of disability is discussed as an alternative to the individual/medical model. A critique of the use of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO, 2001) as the current model of understanding disability in Italy is also provided. Chapter Four is concerned with a critical analysis of the process of policy making and its consequences for the development of inclusive education. This chapter provides an overview of the main interpretations of the policy of *integrazione scolastica* and how such interpretations may impact upon school practice. An alternative reading of how national and statistical data can be interpreted is discussed. Chapter Five provides a description of the struggles being fought at the level of schooling for the implementation of the policy of *integrazione scolastica* and how the latter may impede or contribute to the development of inclusive education.

By investigating its dominant discourses, Chapter Six deconstructs the policy of *integrazione scolastica* and constructs it as a hegemonic discourse of normalisation of disability. Finally Chapter Seven draws together some recommendations concerning possible ways of developing inclusive education further. The last chapter re-capitulates the main issues addressed within the book, including the limitations of a single researcher's study and it offers recommendations of how to develop inclusive education.