

# Inclusion for the 21st Century: Why We Need Disabilities Studies in Education

## L'Inclusione per il 21° secolo: perché abbiamo bisogno dei Disabilities Studies in Education

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The history of inclusive school policies and practices in both Italy and the United States suggest that inclusion is not something we achieve once and for all, but instead must continually be won. In this chapter I describe some of the challenges that both US and Italy have faced in enacting inclusive policies. I argue for the need to be mindful of the ways schools are sites in which the gravitational pull towards exclusion must be persistently countered and resisted by an ever-expanding impulse toward inclusion. I conclude the article by suggesting ways that disability studies in education can provide important insights for how to counteract the tenacious pull toward exclusion and to enact an expanded and more robust vision of inclusion.

**Key-words:** Inclusive Education, Disability Studies in Education, Special Education, Special Needs Education, Integration

abstract

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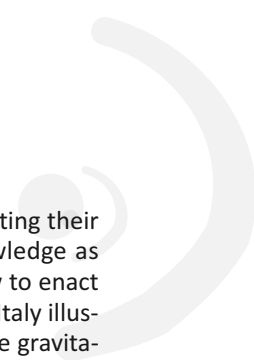
The 1970s and 1980s were watershed years for ensuring the educational rights of students with disabilities in both the U.S. and Italy. Both countries developed educational policies that established the right to education and introduced the inclusion/integration imperative: the idea that students with disabilities must be afforded the opportunity to be educated alongside their non-disabled peers. This imperative was seen as a moral obligation as well as a civil rights issue. Italy's policy of school integration, *integrazione scolastica*, developed during these decades and positioned Italy as the most widely recognized leader in inclusive education in the world. The U.S., too, passed important legislation guaranteeing educational rights for students with disabilities and introduced the idea that students should be educated in the *least restrictive environment*.

The late 1990s and early 2000s expanded this earlier vision on an international scale. The Salamanca Statement (United Nations, 1994), the Dakar Framework for Action (United Nations, 2000), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), each broadened the vision of inclusive education to address all issues of exclusion and marginalization and established inclusive education as a basic human right for all. These more recent efforts to counter exclusion, sometimes referred to as Inclusion 2.0, have been helpful in highlighting a more expansive array of social signifiers that result in exclusion and marginalization (such as those based on race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, etc.) and how these various statuses intersect with disability in producing inequity and exclusion in schools. Both the U.S. and Italy would do well to look to these more recent policies and their expanded vision of inclusion to address ongoing segregation of historically marginalized students groups, which manifest in exclusion of second language learners, Roma students, refugee, and immigrant students, as well as the overrepresentation of students of color in the U.S.

## 1. Different Pathways to Inclusion

There are some significant differences in the ways that Italy and the U.S. have approached and enacted inclusive education. Italy, for instance, identifies far fewer students as eligible for services than the U.S. (2-3% v. 13% of the student population respectively). As Giangreco and Doyle (2015) rightly note, this difference is largely due to Italian schools *not* labeling students with learning disabilities (such as dyslexia) as disabled, but rather as part of a continuum of student abilities that can and should be considered to fall within the "normal" or typical student population. Recent laws ensure that students with dyslexia (and other learning disabilities) do receive appropriate accommodations and supports within the general education classroom. The general classroom teacher, however, is responsible for these supports. Italy also uses far fewer teacher aides (and mostly for non-instructional purposes) than the U.S. The most important (and perhaps impactful) difference is that Italy also enacted changes to the general education classroom as part of their inclusive policy, such as requiring smaller class sizes and establishing co-teaching.

Rather than provide overly simplistic comparisons between U.S. and Italian approaches to inclusion (Giangreco & Doyle, 2015), in this chapter I focus on



some of the shared challenges that both countries have faced in enacting their inclusive policies. These shared difficulties are important to acknowledge as many other countries look to these two countries as examples of how to enact and sustain inclusive schools. Lessons learned from both the U.S. and Italy illustrate the need to be mindful of the ways schools are sites in which the gravitational pull towards exclusion must be continually countered and resisted with an ever-expanding impulse toward inclusion. I conclude the article by suggesting ways that disability studies in education can provide important insights for how to enact an expanded and more robust vision of inclusion for the future.

## 2. Leading the way?

Due to its long commitment to inclusive education (D'Alessio, 2007), Italy has indeed led the way in instituting inclusive education as a widespread and universal practice. Today Italy educates the largest percentage of “students with disabilities in general education classes...[and has among the] fewest special classes and special schools in the world” (Giangreco & Doyle, 2012, p. 65). Italy’s enactment of inclusion, *integrazione scolastica*, has led to increased achievement for learners with and without disabilities alike (Vianello & Lanfranchi, 2011). The U.S. also enacted important legislation supporting the right of students with disabilities to a *free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment*. Parents in the U.S. are important participants in the process of determining eligibility and developing appropriate *individualized education plans*. Parents are also guaranteed due process rights under the law. Citing findings from the National Center on Inclusive Education, Dudley-Marling & Burns (2014) report that inclusion results benefits such as: higher test scores in math and reading; better attendance; and, fewer disciplinary referrals. As a result of their successful enactment of inclusion, both countries are sought out as model programs for other countries, both in terms of their policies as well as inclusive practices.

Yet, despite their leadership, it is not uncommon to find discrepancies between inclusive policy and the implementation of inclusion in both countries. Although both school leaders and teachers in Italy tend to embrace integration as a policy, in visiting schools in Italy, it is fairly common to observe ways that disabled students continue to face marginalization in schools – either overtly (as in being pulled out of class for periods of time for specialized instruction) or through any number of micro-exclusions that signal less than full membership in the general class (D'Alessio, 2011). After conducting research in 16 different schools in five different regions in Italy, for instance, Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter (2012) also found “substantial variation” in terms of implementation of integration (p. 97). My own visits to Italian schools over the course of the past twelve years, confirm their observations. In fact, I would say that I have observed a steady creep of exclusion over the years – such as the creation of *aule del sostegno*, or separate support rooms, which I do not remember seeing on my earlier visits to Italy.

Of course the same criticisms could be leveled at U.S. schools, which also tend to be less inclusive than one might expect given provisions within IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). In tracking the progress of inclusion in U.S. schools, Smith (2010) reminds us that inclusion is never achieved once and

for all but, instead, must be continually be safeguarded against pressures back to the status quo of segregated education. Researchers in Italy and elsewhere might look to Smith's research as a warning about the unfortunate tendency to revert back to segregated classrooms, even in contexts that were once seen as leaders in inclusive education. Smith's text also suggests that in the U.S. context, inclusion is a privilege afforded unevenly, based on perceived severity of a child's disability, rather than a universal right. Specifically, students with disabilities that are considered mild in severity or not involving cognitive or intellectual disabilities are more likely to be placed in inclusive classrooms, whereas students who have more significant or cognitive disabilities are more likely to be segregated. Fierros and Conroy (2002) also report racial and ethnic disparities in terms of restrictiveness of placement, whereby students of color tend to be more segregated and excluded in U.S. schools compared to their white peers, even when they share the same disability label. A recent study by Schmidt, Burroughs, Zoido, and Houang (2015), explored the relationship between socioeconomic status, student achievement, and unequal learning opportunities provided to students. Their findings showed that schooling often exacerbates, rather than ameliorates, social inequality, through a range of sorting practices, including academic tracking and unequal access to high quality instruction. They found significant gaps in achievement and opportunity to learn *between* schools in Italy based on income, whereas inequality was most evident *within* schools in the U.S. In both countries, however, schooling did little to bridge the gap between wealthy and poor students and, in fact, often made these gaps more pronounced by providing different educational opportunities to students of different social classes. Such racial, ethnic, and class disparities continue to plague education, despite the fact that the percentage of students who are included has increased over time (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2015).

Of course, one might point to any number of factors to explain discrepancies between inclusive policy and actual practice. Schools in the U.S. and Italy have both faced the impact of significant economic pressures, influx of culturally and linguistically diverse students, inaccessible school buildings, pressures of high stakes testing and accountability, and persistent teacher shortages. Moreover, despite enacting practices like co-teaching, special educators and *sostegni* often experience marginalization and are rarely positioned equal partners in the classroom (Devecchi, Dettori, Doveston, Sedgwick, & Jament, 2012).

Although classroom teachers in Italy generally have been found to have more favorable attitudes toward inclusion than teachers in the U.S. (Cornoldi, Terreni, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 1998), special education teachers in both countries report a high degree of dissatisfaction due to not being seen as an equal partners within inclusive classrooms. Devecchi et al., (2012) found, for instance, that support teachers in Italy experience "marginalization, isolation, and personal dissatisfaction" (p. 171) in the *sostegno* role because they are not afforded equal status in inclusive classrooms and are, instead, "designated to teach only children with disabilities" and are encouraged to pull students out of the classroom, rather than co-teach. Special education teachers who are assigned to inclusive classrooms in the U.S. are described as "pushing into" the general education classroom. The image of a special teacher having to "push" his/her way into a classroom does not imply that they will be welcomed or invited as an equal part-

ner. Once there, the special educator often plays a more subordinate role in the classroom (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007).

In many inclusive classrooms, the instructional practices of general education teachers are not significantly transformed as a result of either the presence of students with disabilities or support/special education teachers. In other words, classroom teachers are not enacting what we might identify as inclusive strategies (such as differentiated instruction, collaborative teaching, cooperative learning, or universal design for learning), as a result of co-teaching with a special educator or teaching an inclusive class. We might ask, what difference does assigning two teachers to an inclusive classroom make if we are not utilizing both teachers to their full advantage? Can we call a classroom inclusive simply because there are students with disabilities present?

Finally, Beratan (2006) suggests that inclusion laws, such as the Individuals with Disability Education Act in the U.S., which were designed to ensure students with disabilities gain equitable access to education, have inadvertently undermined their emancipatory potential. Scholars have critiqued the largely assimilationist agenda of the current approaches to inclusion (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014; Slee, 1999). As a result, although we now include students with disabilities in general education classrooms, we have yet to fully change the dynamic of that classroom, which created the problem of disability in the first place. Moreover, because both U.S. law and Italian law were created long before scholars in disability studies articulated a social model of disability, both contexts reflect taken-for-granted assumptions about disability that are firmly rooted in deficit model thinking. Thus, although it could be argued that Italy, unlike the U.S., did make some adjustments to inclusive classes (such as lowered class sizes), Beratan contends that the underlying worldview and unquestioned beliefs about disability and difference (including racial difference) embedded in inclusive legislation continues to prohibit the kinds of transformation that are necessary to achieve the goal of inclusive education.

Thus, from a disability studies standpoint, the most important barrier to realizing the promise of full inclusion has less to do with imperfect laws or even errors of implementation, but the failure of these laws to disrupt the medical or deficit models of disability that remain embedded within current educational reforms. In other words, the current models of inclusion or integration have not shifted deficit-based views of disability; they have failed to consider disability as a socially produced and equally valid way of being in the world (D'Alessio, 2013). Thus, a shared failure of inclusive practice in both countries is the inability of these policies to transform general education instructional practice and taken-for-granted views of disability, even as supports and students with disabilities have been brought into the classroom. As Tom Skrtic argued in 1986, simply critiquing the technical practices or even the theoretical underpinnings of special education is inadequate and incomplete. Instead, he called for a complete paradigm shift in the field – a radical break with existing ways of seeing and making sense of the world. More recently, D'Alessio (2013) called for a radical shift away from a “special needs paradigm” inherent in current iterations of integrated (and I would argue inclusive) education practices toward an inclusive model informed by disability studies. For inclusion to be more than a hollow endeavor it must involve, as D'Alessio (2013) writes, “a process of radical transformation of existing education systems in the attempt

to create a more just and equal society” for all (p. 100). In the remaining section of this paper I highlight what I see as the potential of disability studies in education to counter the continued pull towards exclusion and achieve the real promise of a transformative inclusive education.

### 3. Engaging Disability Studies in Education

The emergence of disability studies within the academy offers new analytic tools to examine both disability and normalcy in school policy and practice. Grounded in the social model of disability, disability studies “questions the parameters of normalcy, including who defines and enforces those borders, and most crucially the repercussions for those both inside and outside of these culturally drawn and fluctuating lines” (Gallagher, Connor, & Ferri, 2014, p. 6). In other words, differences between learners are made meaningful by the social context, which determines the social consequences of differences between learners. Why is it that we stigmatize the need for hearing aides more than the need for glasses, for instance? Why do some differences “matter” (like skin tone), while others are seemingly benign (like eye color) (Gallagher et al.)?

Embracing disability studies leads us to trouble many of the assumptions maintained within both U.S. and Italian models of inclusive education. A foundational assumption of a disability studies standpoint, for instance, is that the line separating disability and normalcy is socially constructed, but made to appear natural through diagnostic discourses that transform differences into pathologies. The social model positions disability, “not so much a problem in the bodies and minds of individuals, but rather a problem of societal access and acceptance of impaired (or ‘different’) ways of being in the world” (Gallagher et al., p. 17). From a disability studies standpoint, then, normalcy and disability are not “given,” but rather partners in a symbiotic and dysfunctional relationship; normalcy needs its denigrated other because without disability to prop it up, normalcy ceases to exist. Thus, normalcy could be said to have a “*special need*” for disability.

Disability studies teaches us that questioning the line between normalcy and disability is important because “how we educate students with disabilities has everything to do with how we *understand* disability” (Valle & Connor, 2011, p. xi). Our taken-for-granted assumptions about disability and normalcy justify a number of interlocking practices of dividing, categorizing, and labeling students. Many of these practices, which are foundational to special education practice (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014), serve to further segregate and stigmatize students, a disproportionate number who are already marginalized based on race, ethnicity, gender, language difference, or social class. An unfinished task of inclusive education, therefore, must be to disrupt the centrality of normalcy and ability that remain embedded in current iterations of inclusion and integration. In other words, if we think about integrating or including students with disabilities *into* general education – we may have “widened the circle” (Sapon-Shevin, 2007) of access, but we have not necessarily disrupted the ways that schools continue to privilege students who can assimilate into normative expectations of ability or behavior – those students who can lay claim to smartness and goodness as forms of currency or property (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011). Disability studies scholarship

is therefore essential to dismantling the “myth” of the normalcy that remains firmly entrenched within these practices.

A constructivist view of learning conceives of learning not as something that happens internally, within the student, but in relation with others, activities, and cultural practices (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). It follows then, that learning problems are likewise not located within students, but in transaction with school structures and practices (Dudley-Marling & Burns). In a disability studies model, therefore, the object of remediation necessarily shifts from the bodies, minds, and behaviors of non-normative students to inaccessible, unwelcoming, and inflexible classrooms and school contexts. In working with teachers, I often stress that the social model and its focus on context is much more practical and useful than a medical or deficit model focus on within student differences. As a teacher, it is much easier to change one’s instructional practices than it is to change a student’s brain or body. The classroom context is something that can be modified, whereas a student’s learning difficulties will not likely be so easily changed. Moreover, teachers often find that changes that one makes with students with learning difficulties in mind end up benefiting a wider range of learners in the classroom – a key principle of universal design.

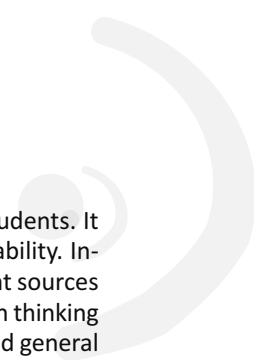
Inclusive educators have long insisted that special education is a set of services, rather than a place, to highlight the idea that services can be provided regardless of setting. Yet, this argument has inadvertently reinforced the idea that inclusion can be achieved simply by *placing* students with disabilities in the general education classroom, without substantially changing the structures of that space. Yet, while arguing that special education is not a place, they have nonetheless focused on inclusion as a place (the general education classroom). In the U.S. we add a temporal dimension to this by procedurally quantifying inclusion as a percentage of time a child spends in a general education classroom. Thus, in the U.S., a student is considered included if he/she spends 80% of the school day in a general education classroom. A disability studies framework, can help us shift from a focus on including bodies into a particular classroom space to fostering active and meaningful participation, access, and belonging in all aspects of classroom life. It can help us to illuminate how rigid and exclusionary school structures and practices fail an increasing number of students. Rather than identify and label an ever-increasing number of students, it only makes sense to shift the very structures and practices that create failure in the first place.

Because both the U.S. and Italy have failed to adequately disrupt the largely separate systems of education, both models inadvertently privilege normative (regular) students by labeling students who are considered problematic or difficult as having “special” needs (Artiles, 2005). Once labeled, disabled students are assumed to be “*fundamentally different* from their nondisabled peers” (Brantlinger, 2004, p. 20) and some degree of exclusion from the general class is often considered necessary to meet their needs. Thus, disability labels function as a discursively produced system of social othering that creates and reifies divisions between students who are considered normal and regular and those who are seen as deficient and disordered (Slee, 2004). In other words, the infrastructure of special education functions primarily to recast what should be thought of as human diversity and variation into disorders and pathologies (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014).

The infrastructure built up around inclusion/integration has also failed to fully merge the two parallel educational systems of general education and special education or promote shared responsibility for all learners. Both Italy and the U.S., for instance, have maintained separate teacher certifications for sostegno or special education teachers. The implicit message that teachers receive is that students with disabilities are so qualitatively different from their non-disabled peers that specially trained teachers must be employed to accommodate their “special needs.” Separately training teachers naturally leads to a lack of shared responsibility for all learners because each partner believes his/her own expertise to be narrow and incomplete. It also suggests that pedagogical content knowledge can and should be divided up between teaching partners – one with knowledge of student difference and the other with knowledge of academic content. This model places an inordinate responsibility on special teachers, who are responsible for accommodating students who are labeled as having “special needs,” rather than on the general education teacher working collaboratively with the special teacher to transform the classroom into a dynamic and responsive learning environment that supports all learners. In practice, this leads to special educators tinkering around the edges of the learning context, making retro-fit accommodations on the fly, rather than wholly shifting practices or fully taking full advantage of both teaching partners. It also absolves the general education teacher from shifting his/her practices in any significant way or taking responsibility for all learners in his/her classroom (D'Alessio, 2013). Finally, it creates divisions and atomization of labor, rather than supports transformation and creative problem solving. In my own work with secondary pre-service teacher educators, for instance, I stress how as content specialists *they* know more about how to scaffold instruction around their content area than a special education teacher who would not have the same expertise or content knowledge. If I am a student who is having difficulty understanding a math concept, for instance, who would be better able to analyze the errors in my thinking and find an alternative way to explain the concept than someone who has had extensive coursework in math? Yet, because we believe the problem is a disability issue (as opposed to a math issue), we assume that a student with a disability who struggles in math requires a *special* educator rather than a really good math teacher. Inclusion for all of its successes, has yet to disrupt this “special needs” orientation, which hyperfocuses on disability, rather than on finding innovative ways to ensure all learners have access to high quality instruction.

Moreover, because disability continues to be seen as intrinsic to the child, classroom instruction often falls outside the diagnostic gaze. In the U.S. context, for example, neoliberal reforms have stressed the importance of evidenced-based instruction for all learners, but particularly for those who struggle to meet grade level expectations. Evidence-based instruction is presumed to be effective for all students and, in fact, not being able to respond adequately to evidence-based instruction can now be counted as “evidence” of a learning disability, with a practice known as Response to Intervention (or RTI). Similarly, in Italy, students who fall outside norms for achievement or behavior continue to be labeled as having special needs. As stated, once a student is labeled as having special needs, classroom teachers are quick to assume that only specially trained teachers will have the necessary skills to meet those “special” needs. A disability studies model would





create more fluid system of supports that would be available for all students. It would also displace professional expertise as the sole authority of disability. Instead, students with disabilities and families would be seen as important sources of expertise and knowledge about disability (D'Alessio, 2013). Rather than thinking of supports for students with disabilities as “softening the blow” of a rigid general education system, a disability studies reorientation would shift to a social justice orientation (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004) focused on educational access, equity, and human rights (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014). At its core, inclusion is a commitment to adapting instruction for all learners, not an expectation that a child will assimilate into the status-quo of classroom practice or school structures. School failure becomes a “school” failure, not a student failure.

Part of this task will require acknowledging that the current system is not working for a wide range of learners and embracing diversity and difference as important sources of knowledge to inform practice (Skrtic, 1991). Skrtic, for instance, positions school failure as primarily a failure in the organizational structure of schools rather than deficiencies within students. In a bureaucratic and rigid system, students that cannot “fit” proscribed and standardized structures and evidence-based methods must be removed. By stepping in to take care of the “problem” of disability and diversity, special education has thus prevented the larger field of education “from entering into a productive confrontation with uncertainty.” Moreover, because uncertainty is a necessary precondition for growth, Skrtic argues that removing diverse students prevents general education from “living up to its democratic ideals” (p. 97) and from benefitting from an important sources of knowledge, change, and progress (p. 126).

To embrace disability studies in schools, classroom contexts would shift in several important ways. Classrooms teachers would both expect and embrace diversity and difference, rather than assume homogeneity. This might mean that rather than focus on “what works” for a majority of students (such as evidence-based practice or undifferentiated curriculum), teachers would understand that all students have unique learning strengths and needs. Teachers would presume competence in students (Biklen, 2005), rather than presume deficits – they would maintain high expectations and share responsibility for all learners. Rather than uncritically assume that students will adapt to arbitrary norms, a disability studies approach would embrace disability-centric ways of knowing and being in the world as equally valid and even preferable if they are the most efficient mode of learning or being for a particular student (Hehir, 2002).

Importantly, the scope of inclusion would expand from simply being about *who* we teach, but also about *what* we teach. Students would be exposed to thinking about disability as an important aspect of diversity and identity and the curriculum would reflect this view. Rather than presuming that inclusion is simply part of a continuum of supports or services, disability studies would encourage teachers to incorporate lessons on the representation of disability in art, literature, and film. Word problems in math might feature a question that required students to estimate how many revolutions a wheelchair would have to travel from point A to point B or that required them to determine the circumference of a classmates tire. Students in history classes might learn about disability rights movements around the world in conjunction with other social and political movements. By incorporating lessons *about* disability, students, both disabled and

non-disabled, would come to learn that disability is part of what it means to be human and to live in a diverse society.

Finally, a disability studies model of inclusion would account for intersectionality and address the multiple ways that students are marginalized in schools based, for example, on social class, primary language, immigrant or refugee status, ethnicity, sexual preference, gender identity, or differences in ability. History has demonstrated that the moment segregated special classes came into being in the U.S., they were disproportionately filled with students from racial and ethnic minority groups, from immigrant populations, and from lower social classes and statuses (Erevelles, 2005; Ferri & Connor, 2006; Franklin, 1987). Racial and ethnic disparities continue in the U.S. both in terms of numbers of students labeled as by type of placement (Waitholler & King-Thorius, 2015). Moreover, black students with disabilities in the U.S. spend considerably more time in segregated special education classrooms compared to their white peers with disabilities (Waitholler & King-Thorius).

Failing to address these other sources of inequity and exclusion has resulted in a longstanding problem of students of color in the U.S. being labeled as having special education needs. Similar overrepresentation in segregated educational placements can be seen among immigrant, refugee, and Roma students across Europe. Informed by critical theory, disability studies attempts to trace the ways that power, exclusion, and inequity reproduce themselves in order to benefit dominant groups. Embracing disability studies within inclusion/integration would require us to take seriously all forms of exclusion and deficit thinking and ensure that schools are places where all manner of difference is embraced and welcomed.

## 4. Conclusion: Need to Lead Once More

Although inclusion or integration, at least on the surface, seems to support educational rights and access, a more critical examination informed by disability studies would help us to see how many of our current practices continue to create forms of social injustice and exclusion. As Linton (2006) argues, “special education is not a solution to the ‘problem’ of disability, it *is* the problem, or at least one of the major impediments to the full integration of disabled people in society” (p. 161, italics in original). Thus, “much work remains to be done to ensure equitable, inclusive, and quality educational opportunities and outcomes” for all learners (Giangreco & Doyle, 2015, p. 25).

Continuing to locate deficits within students, inclusive policies, like all special education practices, serve as tools to reinforce normalcy the exclusivity of general education – allowing it to maintain a false sense of homogeneity and rigid notions of normalcy, even as it allows some students at least provisional access. As recent international policy has recognized, a more fully inclusive policy, or what I like to call Inclusion 2.0, will be necessary to address all of the various ways that students are marginalized in schools. In order to achieve this goal, Italy must once more take the lead by embracing disability studies in education as the way to more fully realize its commitment to fully inclusive education.

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