European Journal of Special Needs Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rejs20

Integrazione scholastica: on not having all of the answers – a response to Anastasiou, Kauffman and Di Nuovo

Beth A. Ferri[a]

[a] Inclusive Education & Disability Studies, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, USA

Published online: 31 Jul 2015.

To cite this article: Beth A. Ferri (2015): Integrazione scholastica: on not having all of the answers – a response to Anastasiou, Kauffman and Di Nuovo, European Journal of Special Needs Education, DOI: 10.1080/08856257.2015.1060074

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2015.1060074

European Journal of Special Needs Education, 2015
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2015.1060074

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Integrazione scholastica: on not having all of the answers – a response to Anastasiou, Kauffman and Di Nuovo

Beth A. Ferri*

Inclusive Education & Disability Studies, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, USA

(*Received 16 May 2015; accepted 18 May 2015*)

Because of its long commitment to inclusive/integrated education, Italy leads the world in educating the largest percentage of its students with disabilities in general education classes. It also boasts the fewest special classes and schools. Inclusion in Italy is based on a principle that disability is not a problem, but rather a positive force in the classroom. Focused on developing the competencies of each student, inclusion/integration shares a belief in the capacity for growth of all learners and an assumption that non-disabled and disabled peers, even those with the most significant learning needs, learn in mutually reinforcing and reciprocal ways. *Integrazione scolastica* is not, therefore, simply a moral or ethical project but has led to increased achievement for learners with and without disabilities. Yet, despite progressive laws and policies and a 30-year history of inclusive education, there remains a need to be hypervigilant to pressures to revert back to the status quo of segregated education. The problem is not a lack of a US-centric approach, as advocated by Anastasiou, Kaufman, and Di Nuovo (2015), which is increasingly out of step with international policy and deeply mired in racial inequalities and a overall lack of efficacy, but rather to find ways to recommit to fully inclusive practices in an era of increased diversity, diminished economic resources and increasing pressures of neoliberal reforms.

Keywords: inclusion; inclusive education; integration; special needs education; Italy; *Integrazione scholastica*

Because of its long commitment to inclusive/integrated education (D'Alessio 2007), 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 and Doyle 2012, 65). Inclusion in Italy is based on the principle that disability is a positive force in the classroom (Canevaro and de Anna, 2010). Focused on developing the 'competencies of each person', inclusion/integration shares a belief in the capacity for growth of all learners (Canevaro and de Anna 2010, 206) and an assumption that non-disabled and disabled peers, even those with the most significant learning needs, learn in mutually reinforcing and reciprocal ways. *Integrazione scholastica* is not simply a moral or ethical project, but has led to increased achievement for learners with and without disabilities (Vianello and Lanfranchi 2011).

It must also be acknowledged that it is not uncommon to see discrepancies between the policy of *integrazione scholastica* and its sometimes uneven

*Email: baferri@syr.edu

implementation (Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2012). Of course, the same can be said for US schools, which despite provisions mandating that students be educated in the *least restrictive environment*, fewer than 18% of students with intellectual disabilities and only 38% of students labelled with autism spend 80% or more of their day in general education classrooms (the operational definition for inclusion in the US) (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2013). US special education has also been widely criticised both for its lack of efficacy and for perpetuating racial inequalities, both in terms of overrepresentation and for more restrictive placements for students of colour (Sullivan et al. 2009). Even a casual observer would acknowledge that schools in Italy have experienced significant pressures in the past 10 years as a result of economic downturns, an increase in culturally and linguistically diverse students from immigrant and refugee populations, recent pressures due to international comparisons of test scores, and persisting teacher turnover and shortages. Finally, Italy is also very much a country with strong regional affiliations and schools often reflect these regional differences.

Like its US counterpart, *Integrazione scolastica* emerged out of a particular set of historical, philosophical, political and pedagogical contexts. In Italy, these ranged from anti-fascism, to unification, to the influence of constructivist educational theories. Educational reforms and reformers such as Maria Montessori, Don Lorenzo Milani, MCE (Movement for Cooperative Education) and Emilio-Reggio approaches to early learning led to a heavy emphasis on individualised, active and cooperative learning, and laid the groundwork for a ua uniquely Italian approach to integrated education. As D'Alessio[1] (2011) writes, 'pedagogy, and more specifically special pedagogy, has always played a crucial role in the development of teaching and learning' in Italy (17). Moreover, unlike the incremental approach in the US, the period of 'inserimento selvaggio' or 'wild integration' (which typically refers to the period between 1971 and 1977),[2] brought about widespread changes to the general education classroom, ushering in more individualised and responsive pedagogies, lowering class sizes, limiting caseloads of sostegnos and the number of students with disabilities in any one class to two, and instituting co-teaching models of instruction, all of which enhanced the education of all learners, including those with disabilities. Many early reformers firmly believe that Italy would have never achieved the level of inclusion had it not been for the willingness to make changes before they had all of the answers. Moreover, this period of experimentation led to widespread reforms that would be the envy of most US teachers.

I respectfully disagree with many of the assertions of Anastasiou, Kauffman and Di Nuovo (2015). As Anastasiou, Kauffman and Di Nuovo (2015) warn, differences in terminology, varying definitions and categories of disability, and lack of shared eligibility criteria[3] combine make cross-country comparisons of inclusion very difficult, if not suspect. I would add that for scholars such as Anastasiou, Kauffman and Di Nuovo, who share a deep commitment to medical/deficit models of disability, clinical assessment and reductionist notions of ability, the Italian system is quite literally foreign territory at a cellular level. Avoiding an ethnocentric view, however, requires a bit more time, reflexivity and careful attention than they have afforded. If there is one lesson that I have taken away from over 10 years of engaging with Italian scholars and visiting schools across five regions of Italy, it is that despite having the most progressive laws and policies and a 30-year history of inclusive education, there remains a need to be hyper vigilant to pressures to revert to the status quo of segregated education. The problem, I argue, is not a lack of a Ua US-centric

approach that is increasingly out of step with international policy and deeply mired in racial inequalities and a oa overall lack of efficacy, but rather finding ways to recommit to fully inclusive practices in an era of increased diversity, diminished economic resources and increasing pressures of neoliberal reforms. As Giancarlo Cotoni,[4] an early reformer said to me, inclusion is not a place you arrive at once and for all, but state of perfection that you continue forever to strive for.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. Simona D'Alessio, who is erroneously referred to as 'he' by Anastasiou et al., is among a growing group of disability studies scholars in Italy who has published widely about *integrazione scholastica. She* is also the editor of a new journal, the *Italian Journal of Disability Studies.* D'Alessio argues that it is time for *integrazione scholastica* to embrace a social model of disability to fully realise its original intent: transforming schools and society.
2. Not the 20-year period claimed by Anastasiou et al. Moreover, their claim that *integrazione scholastica* expanded private schools failed to acknowledge that the percentage of students who attend private schools in Italy represent a small fraction of those who choose to attend private schools in the US. Moreover, the same laws requiring integration of students with disabilities apply to all schools.
3. Because only two per cent of school-aged students are labelled as disabled in Italy, compared to the US, which identifies over 13% of its students (Giangreco and Doyle 2012), one must use care in making comparisons across these two systems. Although students with LD are not labelled, they are nonetheless guaranteed necessary supports by law. Other differences include teacher training: Sostegnos, unlike US special education teachers, must be dual certified. Italy also hires very few paraprofessionals compared to the US, so supports are provided by certified teachers, not teacher aides. Finally, more recent Italian legislation focused on successful outcomes, promoted full access to all aspects of society and affirmed the right to inclusion in the workplace, including instituting hiring quotas and financial incentives to employers who hired people with disabilities (Giangreco and Doyle 2012).
4. Personal conversation.

References

Anastasiou, D., J. M. Kauffman, and S. Di Nuovo. 2015. "Inclusive Education in Italy: Description and Reflections on Full Inclusion." *European Journal of Special Needs Education*. doi:10.1080/08856257.2015.1060074.

Canevaro, A., and L. de Anna. 2010. "The Historical Evolution of School Integration in Italy: Some Witnesses and Considerations." *ALTER – European Journal of Disability Research/Revue Européenne De Recherche Sur Le Handicap* 4: 203–216.

D'Alessio, S. 2007. "'Made in Italy': Integrazione Scolastica and the New Vision of Inclusive Education." In *Policy, Experience and Change: Crosscultural Reflections on Inclusive Education*, edited by L. Barton and F. Armstrong, 53–72. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.

D'Alessio, S. 2011. *Inclusive Education in Italy.* Rotterdam: Sense.

Giangreco, M. F., and M. B. Doyle. 2012. "Integrazione Scolastica in Italy: A Compilation of English-Language Resources." *International Journal of Whole Schooling* 8 (1): 63–105.

Giangreco, M. F., M. B. Doyle, and J. C. Suter. 2012. "Demographic and Personnel Service Delivery Data: Implications for including Students with Disabilities in Italian Schools." *Life Span and Disability: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 15 (1): 97–123.

Sullivan, A. L., E. A'Vant, J. Baker, D. Chandler, S. Graves, E. McKinney, and T. Sayles. 2009. "Confronting Inequity in Special Education, Part I: Understanding the Problem of Disproportionality." *NASP Communiqué* 38 (1): 14–15. Accessed May 15, 2015. http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/mocq381disproportionality.aspx

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. 2013. *The Digest of Education Statistics, 2012* (NCES 2014-015). Accessed May 15, 2015. https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=59

Vianello, R., and S. Lanfranchi. 2011. "Positive Effects of the Placement of Students with Intellectual Developmental Disabilities in Typical Class." *Life Span and Disability: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 14 (1): 75–84.