

Inclusive education in Italy: a reply to Giangreco, Doyle and Suter (2012)

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Abstract

The article is a response to the paper written by Giangreco and his colleagues, which appeared on Life Span and Disability Journal in 2012. By drawing on Giangreco and his colleagues' thought-provoking reflections, this contribution offers another important level of analysis of the policy of integrazione scolastica, which aims at understanding which ideological paradigms influence policy formulation and, most importantly, implementation processes. In order to develop inclusive-oriented schools, this contribution makes a case that the policy of integrazione scolastica² is a problematic policy that needs to be further investigated through the lenses of the Disability Studies approach. By commenting on the findings discussed in Giangreco and colleagues' paper, this article will show how a Disability Studies approach may expand the investigation of this innovative policy from an analysis that essentially focuses on identifying effective special education delivery services and a just re-distribution of resources (e.g. specialist staff) to a study that support a critical investigation of how mainstream settings are currently organized and structured. In particular, the article will provide an analysis of those cultural, economic, political and social frameworks within which the notions of disability and mainstream schooling are currently inscribed and that may determine the reproduction of special education mechanisms despite the overt intentions of developing inclusive-oriented supports. It finally argues for a difference between the policy of integrazione scolastica and the policy of inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Educational Policy, Disability

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² The word integration means different things to different people in different contexts and geographical areas. For this reason, in this article I have decided to maintain the Italian definition of integrazione scolastica to pay respect to the legacy and the heritage of this policy within the Italian context.

1. Introduction

Italy has been internationally credited for being one of the few countries in the world that has pursued the right to inclusive education for all learners with disabilities in mainstream settings since the 1970s. Experts and academics such as Giangreco, Doyle and Suter have come to visit mainstream schools and study the Italian policy of *integrazione scolastica*, seemingly with the hope of grasping the “secrets” of this celebrated progressive policy and innovative practice.

Furthermore, until fairly recently, with the exception of a few researchers (for example D'Alessio, 2007a, 2011a; Vianello & Lanfranchi, 2011) a limited number of Italian scholars managed to publish in English language and to engage in international debates around school integration and inclusion. As a consequence of this, the influence of the Italian experience was circumscribed to those who decided to travel to Italy in order to observe the implementation of integration policies into school practice. Yet, while the rest of the world was still wondering whether learners with disabilities could be educated in regular classrooms, Italy had already passed a legislative decree in favour of the integration of students with disabilities in regular classrooms (Law 118/1971) and had abolished differentiated classes (Law 517/1977).

Italian literature in the field of *integrazione scolastica* has been very prolific and has provided examples of good practice of mainstreaming learners with disabilities in regular classrooms (Canevaro, 1983; 1999; 2007; Cornoldi & Vianello, 1989, 1990, 1995; Canevaro, Cocever, & Weis, 1996; Nocera & Gherardini, 2000; Canevaro & Ianes, 2001; Canevaro, D'Alonzo, & Ianes, 2009; Ianes, Demo, & Zambotti, 2010; Vianello & Lanfranchi, 2011). It has also indicated that this has meant better achievements and attainments for both children with disabilities and without disabilities (Vianello & Lanfranchi, 2011).

Nevertheless, research in the Italian context has mainly focused on the investigation of whether the policy of *integrazione scolastica* were applied or not and what were the consequences of such implementation. Specifically, after the enactment of the Framework Law 104 in 1992, research on *integrazione scolastica* mostly claimed that those episodes of micro-exclusions still perpetuated in regular classes were primarily the result of a lack of the legal application of such a progressive policy in state schools. Since then, very few researchers have attempted to interrogate not only what was happening in Italian schools but also *why* micro-exclusion was taking place forty years after this policy had first been enacted. This article aims to address this omission from the Italian research. It makes a case that the policy of *integrazione scolastica* is a problematic policy whose theoretical premises need to be further questioned in the light of a Disability Studies conceptual framework.

Despite the Italian policy of *integrazione scolastica* appears to create the ideal context for the development of an inclusive school, especially when compared to other policy contexts in Europe in which special schooling is the only available option for learners with moderate and severe disabilities, evidence shows that teachers are still experiencing difficulties in educating learners with disabilities in regular schools (Canevaro, D'Alonzo, Ianes, & Caldin, 2011; D'Alessio, 2011a) and that people with disabilities are struggling for their social integration (Canevaro *et al.*, 2009; D'Alessio, 2011a). Giangreco, Doyle and Suter's paper (2011), from which the present contribution departs, has laid the foundations to reflect on what could eventually help Italian researchers, including myself, to further question what has for long been taken for granted and possibly consider alternative ways of developing inclusive education. Drawing on cross-cultural studies (Ainscow & Booth, 1998; Artiles & Dyson, 2005) the chance of looking at other educational contexts becomes crucial for both visitors and local practitioners. It allows visiting researchers to look at what is happening in other countries and to learn from other contexts and, on the other hand it stimulates local researchers to look at one's own context from a different perspective. The paper written by Giangreco, Doyle and Suter (2012) specifically offers an important opportunity for Italian researchers and academics to draw on the insights of *critical friends* with whom to engage in a collaborative inquiry (Ainscow, 2005), to make the familiar strange (Ainscow & Booth, 1998) and to problematize the choices made so far.

After having provided a short introduction of the concept of inclusive education and the differences with the concept of *integrazione*, the article will discuss to what extent the Italian policy of *integrazione scolastica* can be considered an inclusive policy.

This article is not only conceptual but it draws on qualitative research that was conducted in different Italian contexts between 2005 and 2012. The reflections are based on the observations of classroom activities and the interviews conducted with school principals, teachers, parents, students and policy makers at local and national levels. Although it is necessary to remain cognizant that qualitative research cannot be generalized, it can nevertheless offer an alternative interpretation of the reasons why students with disabilities are still experiencing discrimination in regular settings, often disguised as a form of inclusion and most importantly, what could be done to avoid the reproduction of marginalization and discrimination.

Most of the analyses offered in this paper are concerned with school practices, however, as Giangreco and colleagues also emphasize in their article, attention is also given to the pre-conditions that make inclusion possible in mainstream settings.

The main difference with Giangreco and his colleagues's position however, is that while Giangreco *et al.* (2012) put the emphasis on the need to investigate special education delivery services that may allow inclusion to be effectively implemented, the present article illustrates that such pre-conditions, although important, are destined to fail as they reduce the transformative agenda of inclusive education by allowing schools and their daily routines to remain untouched. As argued elsewhere (D'Alessio, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2013) inclusive education requires a shift from a special needs education paradigm, which generally constructs disability as an individual deficit that must be compensated for with the provision of individualized support and additional services and personnel, to an inclusive education paradigm that requires schools to make radical changes. In order to explain such a position, the present contribution will use the new perspective of the Disability Studies approach, which requires a review of the policy of *integrazione scolastica* and an investigation of those attitudinal, structural and organizational barriers that prevent the most effective special education delivery services to promote inclusive-oriented schools to promote inclusive-oriented schools.

2. What is inclusive education?

Inclusive education is the dominant educational imperative of the 21st century. International bodies such as the UNESCO (2009), the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2011; 2012), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the resolutions of the European Union (Council of European Union, 2009) emphasize the role of inclusive education as one the most important educational standpoints for the development of a quality education for all learners.

At the forty-eighth session of the UNESCO International Conference on Education, held in Geneva in November 2008, inclusive education was described as: "...an ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination" (UNESCO, 2009, p.126).

The UNESCO Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education (2009) provided a series of justifications to further support the development of inclusive education: "First, there is an educational justification: the requirement for inclusive schools to educate all children together means that they have to develop ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and that therefore benefit all children.

Second, there is a social justification: inclusive schools are able to change attitudes toward diversity by educating all children together, and form the basis for a just and non-discriminatory society. Thirdly, there is an economic justification: it is less costly to establish and maintain schools that educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different types of schools specialising in different groups of children” (UNESCO, 2009; p. 9).

Albeit, such justifications can be considered a useful accountability tool for the development of inclusion, it is necessary to acknowledge that in our current policy climate dominated by a human rights approach to education, as supported by the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), the search for a justification to move towards inclusive education should be considered as a rhetorical exercise. Inclusive education is a right that all human beings are entitled to exert, without the need to investigate the cost-effectiveness of basic human principles.

The concept of inclusion can be best understood and interpreted in relation to the concept of exclusion and discrimination. In this concern, the UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) promotes the principles of inclusion in society and in education (Art. 24) by emphasising that inclusive education combats against all forms of discrimination by ensuring that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability.

Despite the efforts made at an international level by international bodies and organizations, the concept of inclusive education remains unclear. Until fairly recently, the separation between the terms of inclusion, special needs education and integration was not clear cut, and it was not unusual that the terms inclusion and integration were used as synonymous (D’Alessio & Watkins, 2009; D’Alessio, Donnelly, & Watkins, 2010). Different commentators (Ainscow, 2008; Mitchell, 2010; D’Alessio, *et al.*, 2010) have attempted to clarify the meaning of this global educational movement in the attempt of providing a common definition that could be shared by researchers and promote its implementation in different geographical, social and political contexts.

Mitchell (2010) in his review on inclusive education, for example, provides 7 different interpretations of the concept of inclusion and inclusive education, suggesting that inclusive education extends beyond special needs issues and the process of mainstreaming learners with disabilities in regular classrooms to investigate cultural and historical beliefs that inform current education systems. He nevertheless indicates that a commonly accepted definition of inclusive education is that children with special educational needs have full membership in age-appropriate classes in their neighborhood schools, with appropriate supplementary aids and support services (Mitchell, 2010).

More recently, in the speech at the UNESCO International Conference in Geneva in 2008, Ainscow (2008) describes inclusion using four different conceptualisations:

- inclusion as a process aiming to respond to diversity;
- inclusion as being concerned with the identification and removal of barriers;
- inclusion as being about the presence, participation and achievement of all learners;
- inclusion that involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement (Ainscow, 2008).

Ainscow and some of his colleagues (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2011) acknowledge that there exist two main conceptualizations of inclusion, namely a narrow and a broad definition. Whilst the former is concerned with the process of mainstreaming learners with disabilities in regular classrooms, the latter is concerned with the process of transformation of the general education system in order to respond to the requirements of all learners. The narrow definition of inclusive education is usually discussed in relation to the education of students who are vulnerable to exclusion. The focus of the intervention is on the individual learner and on the additional resources that must be allocated to ensure that specific individual's needs are met. The broad definition of inclusive education is instead discussed in relation to how education systems can be strengthened to reach out to all students. The focus is on the education system and the existing barriers and how they can be removed. In the latter interpretation, efforts are made to change how schools are currently structured and organized both at the level of cultural values and school practices (D'Alessio, 2011b).

As stated elsewhere (D'Alessio, 2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b; D'Alessio & Cowan, in press) inclusive education has got nothing to do with the process of including learners with disabilities in regular classrooms, but with making societies and schools inclusive. The only reason why inclusive education is usually discussed in relation with issues around learners with disabilities and with special educational needs is because it is along the lines of disability, gender, race and ethnicity that the limits of our system usually become visible and tangible (Slee, 2001; Armstrong, 2003) and, I add, barriers to full participation can be identified and removed.

This article supports a broad and systemic interpretation of inclusive education, which considers inclusion as a process of radical transformation of existing education systems in the attempt to create a more just and equal society. This does not forget individual needs but it makes a case that such requirements are understood within a wider cultural, political, economic and organization framework

and not only resulting from individual deficits and supports. As Barton (1998) puts it: “Inclusive education is not merely about providing access into mainstream school for pupils who have previously been excluded. It is not about closing down an unacceptable system of segregated provision and dumping those pupils in an unchanged mainstream system. Existing school systems in terms of physical factors, curriculum aspects, teaching expectations and styles, leadership roles, will have to change” (Barton, 1998, p.84).

Similarly, Armstrong, Armstrong, and Barton argue: “...inclusive education is not an end in itself. Nor ultimately is the fundamental issue that of disabled people. In educational terms it is about the value and well-being of all pupils. Thus, the key concern is about how, where and with what consequences do we educate all children and young people. This inevitably involved both a desire for an engagement with the issue of change” (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Barton, 2000, p. 1)

As emerging from these statements, inclusive education is essentially a process of change (see Carrington & Robinson, 2004; Ainscow, 2007a, 2007b; Bourke, 2010; Ainscow & Sandill, 2010) of the way in which schools and education systems are conceived, structured and organized so that they can support the education of all learners currently being failed by existing arrangements. A change towards inclusive education requires fundamentally a change in the way general education and mainstream schooling are conceptualised. Put briefly, inclusion requires a radical transformation of the way in which we think about education (Ainscow, 2007a, 2007b), and a rejection of those ideologies that classify, categorise and pathologize difference and support normalization procedures according to abilist and normative constructions of difference (Medghini, D’Alessio, Marra, Vadalà, & Valtellina, 2013).

In addition, inclusion requires all of us to embrace a human rights approach to disability and education, which distances itself from a pedagogical approach that is rooted in a defective view of difference. A human rights approach to disability and education, as the one supported by Disability Studies, makes the case for all learners to be educated in mainstream settings without the need for them to be categorised according to their impairments (Armstrong & Barton, 2001) in order to receive adequate resources.

As Giangreco, Doyle and Suter (2012) also indicate, listening to the voices learners is crucial to plan inclusive classrooms and schools and to organize support (Mortier, Desimpel, De Schauwer, & Van Hove, 2011; Richards, 2012). Mortier *et al.* (2011) in particular, stresses that the voices of learners who receive individual support in schools should always be listened, as most learners are fully aware of what types of support they need and how they would like to receive it.

3. Disability Studies: a new theoretical framework³

Disability Studies is a relatively new field of study that developed in the UK and in the US at the end of the 60s as a result of the movements of people with disabilities (Barnes, Oliver, & Barton, 2002). In particular, the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation led by Vic Finkelstein started to challenge an orthodox view of disability as an individual tragedy and deficit: “In our view, it is society, which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. Disabled people are therefore an oppressed group in society. To understand this, it is necessary to grasp the distinction between the physical impairment and the social situation, called ‘disability’, of people with such impairment.” (Oliver, 1996, p. 22) For the first time disability is studied as a sociological and political phenomenon rather than a medical and/or psychological condition. As stated elsewhere (D’Alessio, Vadalà, & Marra, 2010; D’Alessio, 2013) Disability Studies are based on a series of standpoints:

- A sociological construction of the concept of disability, which distinguishes between impairment - biological condition - and disability - social situation of oppression and discrimination - in which people with disabilities are forced to live as a result of the way in which society is structured
- An application of the social model of disability as a way to investigate socio-cultural, economic, political and cultural barriers that impede the full participation of people with disabilities in society
- The process of empowerment of people with disabilities considered the main agents of change
- The development of an emancipatory research as a new type of participatory research
- The development of a human rights approach to disability in particular in the area of education (Disability Studies in Education)

By drawing on two main conceptual frameworks, such as the social model of disability and a human rights approach to disability, the Disability Studies approach enables researchers to question their own assumptions and carry out new strands of research. The adoption of these new theoretical perspectives in researching the policy of *integrazione scolastica* therefore becomes a fundamental tool for the development of inclusive education in Italy.

³ Given the limited scope of this article it is not possible to provide a full description of the field of Disability Studies. For more information it is possible to read the chapter *Disability Studies in Education. Implicazioni per la ricerca educativa e la pratica scolastica italiana*, in Medeghini et al. (2013).

In my view, (D'Alessio, in press; 2013) these new ideologies may provide different explanations and related solutions for similar phenomena (for example the role of the specialized teachers and individualized supports). To put briefly, a Disability Studies approach for the analysis of the policy of *integrazione scolastica* may bring to the fore the limitations that are embedded in what was once a progressive policy and, finally provide critical awareness for social and school changes.

4. Inclusive education in Italy

The borders of the studies concerning the development of inclusive education and those concerning the application of *integrazione scolastica* in Italy have always been blurred. This also emerges in Giangreco and his colleagues' paper, where the terms of *integrazione* and inclusion are used as synonyms: "...incremental adjustments progressed with a series of legislative efforts (e.g. Law 517/1977; Law 104/1992; Law 185/2006) providing frameworks and mechanisms (e.g. assessment, availability of support teachers, caseload limits, class size parameters, functional dynamic profile, individual educational plan) designed to support the national policy of *school inclusion* referred to as *integrazione scolastica*" (Giangreco *et al.*, 2012, p.99; my emphasis).

This sentence suggests that Giangreco's interviewees tended to use the two terms interchangeably, and possibly that they did not distinguish between the two fields of study.

The reasons for such confusion is that inclusion has usually been considered an Anglo-saxon term for the Italian term integration. After an initial period of rejection in which the term inclusion was considered to be inappropriate for the Italian context (Canevaro, 2001), Italian scholars started to use this new term. Firstly, it was mainly used as a broader type of *integrazione* (Canevaro & Mandato, 2004). Subsequently, inclusion was used in relation to the education of those learners identified as having special educational needs (Ianes, 2005), a new category of students that could not otherwise be identified as eligible of support under the Framework Law 104/1992.

Such interpretations, however, are still located in the theoretical premises of special needs education as they focus their interventions on the identification and categorization of diversity and on the procedures of adaptation and adjustment that are put in place in order to compensate for individual learners' deficits.

Recently, a group of researchers (Medeghini & Valtellina, 2006; Medeghini *et al.*, 2013) including myself (D'Alessio, 2007a, 2007b, 2009a, 2011a, 2013) have investigated the process of *integrazione scolastica* from an alternative perspective to the special educational needs rationale currently used in Italy.

Through the lenses of the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990; 1996) and the Disability Studies approach (Medeghini *et al.*, 2013), *integrazione scolastica* and inclusive education are not interpreted as synonyms, rather as two separate educational cultures that are informed by different theoretical frameworks.

On the one hand there is the policy of *integrazione scolastica*, which is still embedded in a medical/individual model of disability, which constructs disability as an individual deficit that must be compensated for by society. On the other hand there is a policy of inclusion that constructs disability as a form of social oppression and marginalisation lived by those people who differentiate from the norm. Although as indicated by Thomas (2002) in the impairment effects model there is a need to reconsider the consequences of the impairment as being equally disabling as those created by the environment, disability has got nothing to do with the person but with the social, cultural, economic and attitudinal barriers that people with disabilities are encountering every day. Having said this, a Disability Studies approach, like the one supported in this paper, does not forget individual requirements and the need to provide support for them. However, it stresses the importance to do so by contextualizing those individual requirements and to re-organise the response to them in a preventive way.

5. Problematising the policy of *integrazione scolastica*

This article does not intend to forget the positive experiences of the policy of *integrazione scolastica* and the efforts made by many scholars, researchers, parents and disabled people's organizations that contributed to its implementation in the early 1970s. In contrast, it aims at suggesting alternative readings of the episodes of micro-exclusions that are still happening within our education system after more than forty years since this supposedly progressive policy has been enacted. This article, therefore, is willing to bring to the fore the limitations that are embedded in this policy and that could prevent such a policy to move forward to the development of inclusion.

Drawing on the paper by Giangreco *et al.* (2012), the following sections will provide further reflections on the analysis of the policy of *integrazione scolastica*, which expand the themes of discussion and research onto an investigation of the whole education system and society with their normalizing and disabling barriers.

Placement

The issue of placement of learners with disabilities in regular classrooms is certainly a standpoint of the process of inclusion. However, the fact that learners

are taught in the same classrooms, sometimes by the same teachers, does not necessarily provide information about the quality of the teaching and learning that is occurring within the classroom. As Giangreco and colleagues (2012) have also indicated, it is necessary to understand, for example how much time do learners with disabilities actually spend within the same classroom and what do they do. In this concern, in one of my studies, a specialised teacher reported: “The problem is that the child is not withdrawn from the classroom anymore, but this does not mean that the student is really integrated. We keep him inside the classroom but this may result in something worse. There is no *integrazione* if you have to leave the room, but equally there is no *integrazione* if you remain inside the classroom, but in a corner and doing something on your own with your support teacher...” (D’Alessio, 2011a, p.102).

In alignment with Giangreco *et al.*’s work (2012), this statement indicates that, the mere presence of learners with disabilities in regular classroom does not alone ensure quality of curriculum, instruction or support. Not unrelatedly, Ainscow (2008) states that inclusive education is not only about accessibility, but also about participation and achievements of learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. What is crucial therefore is not only placement in regular settings but whether learners are withdrawn from the regular classroom whenever they encounter some sorts of difficulties and finally, what do they manage to achieve. Put briefly, it is important to understand which inclusive pedagogy is used by general teachers to foster the education of all learners in mainstream classrooms and what strategies are put in place by the mainstream setting to meet the requirements of all learners.

Giangreco and colleagues report that the official placement rates offered by the Italian Ministry of Education indicate that 98% of learners with disabilities are educated in regular classes (Giangreco *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, they also argue that actual number of Italian students with disabilities educated in regular classroom for their entire school time is not clear as learners with disabilities: “...are pulled out of class for individual or small group instruction, for behavioural reasons, or to receive services (e.g. physical therapy) away from school during the school day. What can be said with some confidence is that approximately 98% of students with disabilities in Italy attend regular class for all, most or some portion of the school day, but the average percentage of time in versus time out of the regular classroom is unknown” (p. 101).

The realities and complexities of student participation and placement in mainstream classrooms have been partly addressed by a recent research conducted by Canevaro *et al.* (2011), which provides data on the actual participation of learners with disabilities in regular classrooms through schoolteachers’ perceptions.

This research brings to the fore a series of weak points in the system of *integrazione* with strong geographical differences between northern and southern schools and with some students with disabilities spending most of their school time outside the classrooms. In this concern, teachers report that around 39.5% of learners with disabilities are always taught within the mainstream classrooms, whilst 54.8% of learners with disabilities are taught partly inside and partly outside the mainstream classroom, and about 5.7% of learners with disabilities are reported to be always taught outside the mainstream classroom. The researchers also indicate that the percentage of learners with disabilities that are taught outside the mainstream classrooms for all of their school time is higher in lower secondary schools (6.8%) than in primary and upper secondary schools (5.6%). The data on learners' participation, however, become extremely negative in vocational education where the percentage of learners with disabilities educated outside the mainstream classroom is 9.8%. The main reasons for such withdrawals are explained in terms of didactical reasons, hence the teaching and learning methods used within the classrooms that do not allow individualization of learning pathways. Such research shows that along with examples of full participation in mainstream classrooms, *integrazione scolastica* is also characterized by episodes of partial or no participation of learners with disabilities in regular classroom activities (Canevaro *et al.*, 2011).

Issues about classification, categorization of disabilities and related data collection

Placement is an important factor to assess the quality of an inclusive system but it is only one possible parameter to evaluate the process of inclusion, and not necessarily the most relevant one. This is also due to the fact that different countries have developed different modalities to identify and categorize disability and special educational needs. The differences in the number of learners identified with disabilities are linked to administrative, financial and procedural regulations and they do not really reflect variations in the actual incidence of the types of impairment that students possess (D'Alessio & Watkins, 2009). For example in a series report by OECD (2012), the highest percentage of learners identified as having special educational needs (above 19%) was found to be in Iceland, while Sweden reported less than 1%. Such difference cannot be interpreted as if all learners with special educational needs were born in Iceland, especially considering that the two countries present similar epidemiological and hygienic life conditions (D'Alessio & Cowan, in press). What instead can be found out is that learners with disabilities are identified and "counted" in a different way in different countries (D'Alessio & Cowan, in press).

There is in fact no agreed definition of SEN that can be used across different countries (D'Alessio *et al.*, 2010). This is clearly important to understand that special needs education is a social construct that depends on the way in which countries organize their legislative, administrative and financial systems to respond to diversity in education. Nevertheless, as also argued by Giangreco *et al.* (2012) these different categorical and procedural arrangements have important consequences on the life of learners with disabilities: "As a result of these socially constructed differences in disability definitions and special educational needs labeling, there are students with specific learning disabilities in US, some of whom spend the majority of their school day in special education classes, who if they lived in Italy would not be certified as 'disabled' under Italian education law and would in regular class full-time" (p.102)

Such considerations require that the process of data collection in relation to the education of learners with disabilities should be investigated further. In this concern, the UN Convention (2006) states that the process of data collection should be conducted to enable countries to formulate and implement policies that give effect to the Convention (Art. 31) and are aligned with the principles of human rights, including the right to inclusive education (Art. 24).

As Daniels' (2006) also argues the process of collecting statistical data on the actual number of learners with disabilities should be interrogated as a problematic process itself rather than being considered as a neutral exercise of statistical data collection. It derives that researchers in the area of inclusive education should investigate statistical data referring to the numbers of learners with disabilities as a result of specific constructions of difference in education and not as disinterested acts. Eligibility criteria and assessment procedures to identify disability may also result from the vested interests of professionals or from a school strategy to obtain more resources. The fact that categorisation of disability is a 'socio-cultural process' (Daniels, 2006), which reflects political, administrative, social, economic and systemic priorities rather than mirroring pupils' requirements is also visible in the lack of any pedagogical advice that should accompany the issuing of functional diagnoses of disability and the writing of individual educational plans.

In addition, many countries, including Italy, usually refer to the increasing number of learners with disabilities educated in regular classrooms as a factor of inclusiveness, possibly as a strategy used by governments to excel when compared to other countries (D'Alessio, 2007a). In Italy for example the number of learners with disabilities educated in compulsory mainstream school settings has increased from 114.239 in the school year 1994/1995 to more than 208.521 in 2010/2011. Although such figures could be interpreted as an indicator of inclusion,

they could also be interpreted as an indicator of the challenges that mainstream schools are facing to deal with the increasing heterogeneity of students as well as the difficulties that teachers have to address when they have to instruct learners with different learning styles or from different ethnic minorities. This is also evident from the fact that a great number of learners from ethnic minorities are often classified within the category of learners identified as having special educational needs in countries such as the US and the UK (Michell, 2010). The issue is whether such statistical exercises are serving the needs of the students or otherwise (Daniels, 2006; Florian, Hollenweger, Simeonsson, Wedell, Riddell, Terzi, *et al.*, 2006). It would be interesting therefore to develop a system that count barriers to learning that are still in place (such as the existence of special units, the lack of teacher training for mainstream teachers, the use of individualized educational plans as forms of separate instructions within the mainstream classrooms, the lack of time for meeting and plan life project support and service delivery among different stakeholders at the local and national levels), including the overreliance of one-to-one paraprofessional supports (Giangreco, 2010), rather than counting students with disabilities. Although it is important to understand the trends of where students with disabilities are currently placed and in which percentage, this data collection activity continues to put the emphasis on individual learners as the focus of analysis, an aspect that is central in the special education needs approach to education and schooling. In general, I argue that statistical data concerning the number of learners with disabilities provide information about the fact that schools need to change in order to be able to meet the requirements of a wide range of learners.

An attempt to solve the problem and to find a common definition that could be shared by all countries has been made by the World Health Organisation with the development of the International Classification of Functioning and Disabilities and Health (WHO, 2001), which aimed, among other things, to develop a common language to define and classify disability. However, its implementation in the education sector and the long-term consequences for the development of an inclusive education system require further scrutiny (D'Alessio, 2006; Medeghini *et al.*, 2013). So far the problem of using comparable data has been addressed by referring to the most segregated options (education in special schools or classrooms) as the most accurate available data across different countries (Giangreco *et al.*, 2012). The same concerns are shared by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, which collects statistical data focusing in particular on the rates of learners with disabilities that are educated in segregated settings – special schools or classes where they spend more than 80% of their school time away from their classroom peers (D'Alessio & Watkins, 2009).

Specialised staff

Research conducted by Giangreco and his colleagues has primarily focused on the work of teaching assistants (or special education paraprofessionals in the US) and their role in the process of supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms (Giangreco & Broer, 2007; Suter & Giangreco, 2009; Giangreco, 2010; Giangreco *et al.*, 2011). Much of Giangreco's work in this area has emphasized the need to investigate further why specialist staff with generally lower educational preparation usually instructs learners with higher support needs (Suter & Giangreco, 2009; Giangreco *et al.*, 2011). It also interrogated the impact of paraprofessionals on the process of independence of learners with special educational needs, the process of peer socialization and academic achievements of learners with disabilities (Giangreco & Broer, 2007; Giangreco 2010).

Although most of Giangreco and his colleagues' contributions over the years have focused on research conducted in Vermont (US) their findings are nevertheless crucial to understand why schools tend to be over-reliant on teaching assistant when it comes to instruct learners with disabilities. Giangreco *et al.*, (2012) therefore provide a series of interesting reasons why this situation is happening, some of which are related to the workload of specialist teachers and on the outdated procedures of assignment of specialized staff. Some of the concerns discussed by Giangreco and his colleagues' research may be helpful to understand what is happening in Italy, in particular the increasing trend of over-relying on paraprofessional supports for learners with disabilities. Much in agreement with Giangreco's works I believe the overreliance of paraprofessionals can lead to a host of inadvertent detrimental effects (Giangreco, 2010) and that there is a need to develop tools that can help determine whether paraprofessional supports are appropriate and necessary. Albeit, Giangreco (2010) does not intend to eliminate paraprofessional supports as a whole, he nevertheless argues that this type of support should be considered among the most restrictive support options, especially when it is used for teaching and learning purposes. Giangreco *et al.* (2012) suggest that decision makers should reconsider assignment procedures and ratios of specialized staff for people with disabilities. In particular, there is the need to assign specialist teachers and paraprofessionals on total enrollment of learners and not only on the numbers of learners with disabilities, thus avoiding detrimental effects such as stigmatization and labeling for learners with disabilities (Giangreco *et al.*, 2011). In addition such assignment procedures based on the total enrollment of learners would shift the emphasis on the school and its limitations rather than on learners' deficits. Similarly, the authors also require researchers and policy makers to investigate the ratio between students with disabilities and specialized

staff as numbers that count to investigate the development of inclusion. These ratios could be used as alternative ways of making accurate comparisons of personnel utilization internationally, and eventually, to evaluate the level of inclusiveness of an education system.

The work of Giangreco *et al.*, (2012) on specialized staff, therefore, becomes crucial to investigate the policy of *integrazione scolastica*, especially because such a policy fundamentally relies on specialized staff as the main actors of the process of integration and it has always identified the specialised teacher - so called “*insegnante di sostegno*” - as the main factor of the process of instructing learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Although legislation indicates that specialized teachers should be used to support the learning process of all students, in reality they are mostly used to support the education of learners with disabilities (D'Alessio, 2011a). Such situation results in a contraction that usually produces what in the literature is known as the process of delegation (D'Alessio, 2011a), by which learners with disabilities are literally shifted into the hands of specialized colleagues that are “able to care” for them. Although as a former mainstream class teacher myself, I fully understand the difficulties that class teachers need to face to instruct learners with different requirements and I strongly support the need to further develop pre-service and in-service training for all teachers in the area of inclusive education (D'Alessio, 2009b), I also believe that the specialisation of specialized staff can be used as an excuse to avoid taking the responsibility for the entire student population. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge that the problem resides in the way in which specialized and mainstream teachers are currently trained and educated and that the separation in the teacher education courses is inevitably reproduced in the work place (D'Alessio, 2009b). In a recent report on Teacher Education for Inclusion across Europe (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2011), international recommendations suggest the need to further explore the possibilities of merging courses for specialized and mainstream teachers. Similarly, there is the need to revise the content of courses in order to develop inclusive practitioners (D'Alessio, 2009a). In this concern, inclusive teacher education should take into account the study of a series of skills, competences and most importantly values that teaching and learning for diversity requires rather than focusing only on the specialist and medical knowledge about the different types of impairments.

Much in agreement with Giangreco *et al.* (2012), I argue that specialized teachers should be spending more time in co-teaching learners with disabilities in collaboration with class teachers. However, as the definition of special education delivery services also indicates, the reflections made by Giangreco and

his colleagues seems to stem from a special needs education paradigm. In my view, it appears that Giangreco's article primarily makes a case that the factors that can be conducive to inclusion are essentially effective special education delivery services for learners with disabilities, for example the need to adequately staff an inclusion-oriented school and to just allocate and re-distribute additional resources. Such practices, however, are mostly focused on the individual learner with disabilities as the main recipient of support, rather than on the school/education system, with the consequences that teaching and learning routines remain untouched.

When looking at such issues from an inclusive education perspective, as supported by a Disability Studies approach, an inclusive-oriented school requires instead a radical transformation of teaching and learning routines (e.g. at the level of pedagogy, assessment, curriculum and school organization). Drawing on my research (D'Alessio, 2009b; D'Alessio *et al.*, 2010; D'Alessio, 2011a, 2011b) I argue that a focus on an "effective" assignment of specialized staff, although made in beneficial terms to improve the quality of schooling, usually tends to avoid mainstream schools to question current structures and arrangements and promote radical change, as inclusion should do. Rather, the presence of specialized staff may prevent mainstream teachers to investigate their teaching in inclusive terms, and the school settings from challenging current arrangements in terms for example of pedagogy, class size, curriculum and assessment procedures.

Put briefly, an inclusive approach requires that such specialist staff be re-considered not in terms of additional resources for individual learners, but as a tool to provide support to the entire school population. Although from a legislative perspective specialized personnel should be considered as a resource for the whole classroom (Law 104/1992), in practice the fact that they are employed according to the number of learners with disabilities and the severity of their impairments inevitably creates a strong link between being a specialized teacher and working with a learner with disabilities, not to mention the triggering of a perverse incentive that see many schools increase the number of statements as a strategy to obtain more resources and personnel. It derives that specialised teachers and teaching assistants have been transformed from agents of change, as the original policy of *integrazione scolastica* envisaged at the beginning of the 70s, to a mechanism that can fix those learners that could represent a challenge to mainstream teachers so that the daily unfolding of teaching and learning remains untouched.

6. Discussion: A critical analysis of the policy of *integrazione scolastica*

Giangreco *et al.*, (2012) have focussed on the different types of service delivery interventions and placement rates, and they have claimed that service delivery configurations (e.g. staffing patterns, class size configurations) are crucial factors to allow integration and inclusion to happen, especially because without effective configurations even the most important innovations in teaching and learning will not be implemented or sustained over time (p. 98). However, although I fully understand that service delivery variables and parameters are crucial to ensure that learners with disabilities receive the adequate amount of support and assistance they require to attend regular schools, such an approach fails to investigate the reasons why the policy of *integrazione scolastica* perpetuates forms of exclusion within the mainstream settings despite its purposes of doing otherwise.

A critical analysis of the policy of *integrazione scolastica* should attempt to move beyond a descriptive analysis of the legal implementation of a policy and its struggles to apply a series of legislative measures. Rather a critical analysis of the policy of *integrazione* should start investigating the limitations that are embedded in the policy.

I argue that the problems that are concerned with the process of *integrazione scolastica* in Italy are not concerned with how (service delivery variables) and if the policy of *integrazione scolastica* is applied in school contexts. As stated elsewhere (D'Alessio, 2011a), I make a case that the policy of *integrazione scolastica* (in particular Law 104/1992) is primarily embedded in a conceptualization of disability as an individual deficit that needs to be adjusted and compensated for by the education system. To put it briefly, integration is still embedded in a special needs education paradigm that seems to legitimate mechanisms, such as individualisation, categorisation, standardised assessment, the allocation of resources and specialised teachers based on the severity of impairment and other special arrangements that undermine inclusion. All these mechanisms may be “well intended” in terms of confronting previously discriminatory policies and practices, yet, paradoxically, they persist in constructing some individuals as “other”.

An interpretation of *integrazione scolastica* as a policy that provides additional resources to regular schooling is also very dangerous, especially in a time of economic crisis where the expenditure cuts are mostly concerned with those resources that are perceived as being ‘supplementary’. In contrast, resources for inclusive education should be considered as normal resources that are necessary for the daily unfolding of mainstream schooling (Medeghini & D'Alessio, 2012).

By focusing on a technical investigation of whether such a policy has been applied in schools or not and how (for example the allocation of resources and personnel), research has failed to investigate why episodes of micro-exclusion are still in place despite more than forty years have passed since the policy was first implemented. There seem to be two main conceptualizations of the notion of *integrazione* in Italy, a systemic and a reductionist one (D'Alessio, 2009b): “The original conceptualization of *integrazione* the systemic one considers the policy of *integrazione* as an educational policy whose purpose was to challenge the education system. It envisaged a re-consideration of the entire education system starting from the experience of integrating disabled students into regular schools. The process of mainstreaming disabled students and the difficulties tackled during its implementation, would have brought to the fore the rigidity of a system, which needed to be reformed. The second conceptualization, the reductionist one, is contingent upon the allocation of resources, and based on compensatory forms of assistance which envisage the deployment of specialized pedagogical and didactical methods to promote the integration of disabled students in mainstream classrooms. These methods, such as adaptation and curricular adjustments, require change on the part of the disabled student who is provide with additional resources to fit in with the existing structure or alternatively, to follow a different learning pathway within the mainstream... this conservative interpretation of *integrazione* leaves mainstream schools and contexts unchanged... and operates within a framework of compensation and normalization of disability” (D'Alessio, 2009b, p.58).

This reductionist interpretation of *integrazione* indicates that different stakeholders have mistaken the means of *integrazione* – mainstreaming learners with disabilities in regular classrooms – with its original purpose – which consisted in reforming the education systems. Basically, the process of *integrazione scolastica* was a means to create a better education system drawing on the experience of educating learners with disabilities in regular classrooms. However, I argue that, the problem with the policy of *integrazione scolastica* and the development of inclusive education is not only due to the fact that the current practice of *integrazione* neglected its original purpose but also that the original policy continues to be enshrined in a construction of disability in terms of inferiority and pathology that needs to be compensated for.

7. Conclusions

This article has shown how the Disability Studies approach can contribute to

the problematisation of the policy of *integrazione scolastica* in the light of developing inclusive policies and practices. The Disability Studies expands the concept of *integrazione* beyond the role of care and assistance to investigate issues around change and transformation of education systems.

After having investigated the different conceptualizations of the policy of *integrazione scolastica* and inclusive education, the article has discussed the meaning the concept of inclusive education both internationally and nationally. This discussion is fundamental to present the conceptual framework that underpins the present contribution and upon which the reflections and suggestions provided by Giangreco *et al.* (2012) have been analysed and discussed. The contribution also highlights the importance of taking into account learners' perspectives and voices when it comes to the organization of systems of support in mainstream settings (Mortier *et al.*, 2011; Richards, 2012; Giangreco *et al.*, 2012).

Finally, the article makes a case for the need to move from a special needs education approach that focus on the need to provide effective delivery services for learners with disabilities in regular classrooms to a Disability Studies approach that challenges current constructions of learners' diversity and puts an emphasis on a radical transformation of mainstream schooling.

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