

Inclusion in Italy and in Slovenia some notes

Inclusive education is a really important general notion for both society and school, but still insufficiently known in public opinion. What I mean with this claim is that: even if the inclusion is a duty for every State in UE, often the idea is not really shared beyond the institutions that are involved in it. Even in Italy, where the inclusion has a traditional, strong and memorable history. In the past, children with disabilities were educated only in separate classes and schools. Nowadays instead, even if some exception often related to a very specific kind of disability persists, children are educated at staying together as much as possible. Obviously, placing different children together doesn't mean “inclusive education” in itself. Also, a positive context is needed, along with support and commitment from teachers, educators, family, peer-groups and others. In line with the “social model of disability” and in contrast with the “medical model”, disability is a cultural concept, an evolving idea that is the result of the interaction between impairments and environmental barriers, a particular physical or mental status that everyone can experience in their life. For this reason, in the educational context, we assume the definition “special educational needs” (SEN), as it is formulated in the Salamanca Statement (1994):

“special educational needs refers to all those children and youth whose needs arise from disabilities or learning difficulties. Many children experience learning difficulties and thus have special educational needs at some time during their schooling. Schools have to find ways of successfully educating all children, including those who have serious disadvantages and disabilities. The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have.” (1)

1 The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education Access and Quality, UNESCO, Salamanca, Spain, 7-10 June 1994.

Inclusive education and social inclusion in Italy

Italy has a relevant legislation about inclusion which is really strong and effective, strengthened by praxis and improved through years thanks to well-prepared special needs teachers. Inclusion for pupils with disabilities was firstly introduced by the Law 118/1971. Thanks to the implementation of this law, special children started to be placed in common classes as a recognized right of equal opportunity in education. But another very important law was the Law 517/1977, which completely abolished special schools. The abolition of special schools has forced Italy's education system, institutions and context to a mandatory adjustment of the professional competences (for teachers and for all professionals like educators, assistants, etc.), services and structures. In the past years several other regulations and guidelines have been introduced in order to improve inclusion. The most relevant is Law 104/92 for the Assistance, Social Integration and the Rights of Disabled Persons. Even if the circumstances are not always the most suitable in Italian schools to implement the "school for all" and the inclusive approach - because of a lack or delay or non homogeneous distribution of the financial resources, structures and services - we can say that during the past 40 years schools and society in Italy have changed minds, and habits, and now they are more inclusive than in the past.

In general one can say that, in the Seventies, the co-education practises in the education theory and in the Italian public opinion follows to the segregation. Later, it is with the Law n. 517/1977 that the co-teaching in mainstream schools for pupils with disorders or deficit becomes real, because of the totally abolishing of both special schools and distinguished classes. From the beginning in the education system a great role was covered by the support teacher for handicap (ita: insegnante di sostegno) and it is still now the most important one for the scholastic inclusion. This professional position evolved with the conception of disability and learning difficulties. In the 1979 (CM - 28 luglio 1979, n. 199) the support teacher for handicap is described as a teacher at the same level of the others, co-teaches in the class and is directly involved in the elaboration and evaluation of activities in classroom and in school. In the Eighties (CM del 3 settembre 1985, n. 250), the concept of the integration (compensatory approach) evolved into the inclusion commitment as a process: the responsibility of inclusion

is not only in charge of the support teacher for handicap but it is a duty share also between with all the teachers and all the school community (I can say “normal” pupils included). Meanwhile, other national legal frameworks had arisen with the aim of improve the rights of pupils with deficit to be included at every level of schooling and implement the working rights (the inclusion at work). That is the point: the inclusion policy was made at national level and not concerned only education, but society and working places. The duty to remove all economic and social obstacles which can limit the full personal developing and the effective participation in political, economic and social life is a responsibility of the Italian Republic (Fundamental Principles N.3 and N.4). In other words, everyone who has a deficit, difficulties or other forms of disadvantage, has the right to be “included”, receive social and educational supports and has the duty to contribute to society as every other citizens.

Therefore, how does it work at school in Italy?

The education system, as the main institution for developing of skills and personality and for socialization, must guarantee the appropriate conditions to every children, in particular in the compulsory schooling. Thanks to the Law n. 104/1992 and the DPR – 24/02/1994 different welfare and governance institutions started to work together and to share resources founding the “Provincial Work Groups between Institutions” (Gruppi di lavoro interistituzionale provinciale – GLIP). Then, those working groups have evolved during the recent years to respond to the new SEN challenges, but essentially the team is composed by specialists of welfare state (medical experts, psychologists, educators but also parents, teachers and others) whom have to recognize for every child the disabilities, the deficit and the learning difficulties or others kind of social needs and support. In the case of mental impairment, this professional team is responsible for the diagnostic and certification of handicap, has to elaborate the functional diagnostic with difficulties and potentialities of the single child, has to elaborate the personal profile of development, outlines the educative and personal life goals. Class teachers at the staff meetings indicate with parents and the support teachers for handicap, eventually also with other educators, the Educational Individual Plan (PEI – Piano Educativo Individuale). The PEI is the personal curriculum of children with cognitive deficit or retard and this can be modified every year in relation to improvement or

changes in circumstances. PEI provides to reach the aims: ordinary, simplified or different. Only if is the case of pupils that pursue differentiated objectives, these pupils at the end of schooling do not receive a legal diploma. The parents have to approve or not approve the different curriculum, and in the last case the PEI must be revised. That is because to decide everything about education is exclusive rights of parents. So the point is that, by a didactics view, the idea of “intellectual disability” does not exist as a general meaning, there are only obstacles to learning and to achieving personal, academic and social results. In many cases of disadvantage, the national and regional assistance system must provide to family and children other integrative support in addition: social, medical, psychological and educative help in the after school, in the daily-life and so on. For example, I taught for a year to a fifteen girl grow-up with a mild intellectual impairment (F70 - ICF) who was attended a mainstream vocational school to become a shop owner/assistant. Thanks to the support and to the great job done on her during the years by institutions, compulsory schools and parents, she constantly improved herself. Maybe she will not be able to be completely independent in conducting her own shop or working activity, but after a year that I met and helped her to study, I can say that she is really integrated in society, she has friends and with my integrative support in the afternoons she achieved good results at school, often better than her classmates less motivated to study than her. This is a positive case, though there are negative cases too. There are plenty of variables that contribute to academic success and to integration in society. But only few times, I can say that only in presence of a really severe mental disorder, one can be evaluated like 'unable' or 'not able' to share the classroom lifetime. Even if is the case of pupils with a really severe mental disorder, the effort is to try to let them attend compulsory schools and to stay in classroom with others pupils as long as possible. Obviously in the school hours they have a full-time teacher, do a special curriculum and can do activities separated by their classmates. After schooling, the Italian welfare must provide assistance, educational continuity, and tutoring in the adulthood.

Something about Slovenia: legislation and how it works

Slovenian history as an autonomous state starts with the declaration of independence from Federal Peoples' Republic of Yugoslavia on 25 June 1991, after a national referendum. Then, Slovenia adopted a new Constitution and, on 15 January 1992, the EU officially recognises Slovenia's independence. It was in May 2004 that Slovenia became a member of the EU. In fact, even if fundamental rights of disabled persons are guaranteed by Constitution, Slovenian relevant legislation about inclusion is quite new. (2)

It is with the Placement of Children with Special Needs Act (ZUOPP, 2000, 2006, 2007) that Slovenia definitely adopted the social approach to child disability but, unlike Italy, Slovenia adopts a multi-track approach to inclusion.

Specified by law of 2000, the classification of children solely on the basis of particular disabilities was suspended. The emphasis was placed rather on the needs of children and it formed a concept of the integration model of education. It redefined children with special needs who need adaptations and/or assistance in the education process. If the assistance and adaptations cannot be ensured in mainstream kindergartens or schools, the needs of a child are identified in the placement procedure and the child is then placed into a suitably adapted programme. The programme is in special schools or institutions for education of children with special needs or in classes or groups established for this purpose within mainstream kindergartens and schools. (3)

This Placement entered into force on September 1, 2013 and defines the groups of children with SEN, who have different options. They can attend: mainstream schools, schools with individual adapted programmes, units in mainstream schools with an adapted programme, special institutions. There are special institutions for education of: blind children and children with visual impairments, children with physical disabilities, children with emotional and behavioural disorders. The choice of school depends on Placement Commission of the National Education Institute. The decision is submitted to the parents who

2 VanjaKiswarday, *The Process of Implementing Inclusion in Slovenia*, Faculty of Education, University of Primorska.

3 *Slovenia: Educational Support and Guidance* at "https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Slovenia:Educational_Support_and_Guidance". Eurydice is a network of the European commission that collects informations and explain how education systems are organised in Europe.

may appeal against the decision.

It is the Placement Commission that decides under specified procedure [on the basis documentation, interview with and/or examination of the child, expert opinions] on placing a child in a programme and a kindergarten or school. It decides also on adapted implementation of education programme, instruction time, type and manner of additional professional or physical assistance, and eventual other rights (e.g. free transportation, adapted facilities, etc.). Parents have the right to appeal against the decision. The appeal is considered by the commission of second instance at the ministry of education. The commission reflects on criteria and level of child's development, child's ability to learn and achieve required standards of knowledge, aetiology and prognosis in view of the child's deficiencies, barriers and disorders. The criteria for determining type and degree of disorder of SEN children are specified by the Rules on the organisation and methods of work of commissions for the placement of SEN children. (4)

Pupils with special educational needs attend the mainstream schools with an adapted programme that, if it is the case, certificate an equal educational standard of knowledge as their peers.

Developing real inclusion in Slovenia

As it is written in “*Attitude towards inclusion: an important factor in implementing inclusive education*” (Vanja Riccarda Kiswarday, Tina Štemberger 2016):

the characteristics of this first period reflect an integration paradigm – a process that opened the doors to children with SEN in regular education, but in which schools and teachers were not yet ready to respond appropriately to the demanding challenges. There were noticeable differences in levels of quality and supportiveness toward students with SEN, due to a lack of school policy and system guidelines. Consequently, students had to adapt to regular school environments and expectations with only minimal alterations. (5)

4 Slovenia: *Special Needs Provision Mainstream Education* at “https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Slovenia:Special_Education_Needs_Provision_within_Mainstream_Education”.

5 Vanja Riccarda Kiswarday, Tina Štemberger, “*Attitude towards inclusion: an important factor in implementing inclusive education*” in Nikoleta Gutvaj, Milja Vujačić editors, *Challenges and Perspectives of Inclusive Education*, Belgrado 2016, p. 77-78.

That is understandable, the need of teacher training and arrangement in the general system of education, and for services and equipments as well. In fact, the conclusion of a research done asking the opinion of Slovenian school counsellors shows that the duality (regular vs special education) is still considered better than real inclusion and that they are ready to support only partially the inclusive model of integration. But it is also true that:

it does not mean that teachers in general schools will not be faced with the challenge of teaching exactly such students. Namely, following the parents' freedom of choice and because we comply with the Convention of children's rights in what is best for the child, it may happen that such students will find themselves in ordinary classrooms, and teachers will be faced with new challenges or possibly distress. (6)

However, in the research "*Attitude towards inclusion: an important factor in implementing inclusive education*" done asking some preschool teachers their opinion about inclusion, the results shows that teachers have a predominately positive attitude, because : "they believe they are very skilful, and they perceive that they also have the necessary knowledge to work in inclusive settings". That is because Slovenian teachers and preschool teachers: "were systematically involved in a variety of in-service training on inclusive education".

Drawing an open conclusion...

I think that the challenge is always the same: to guarantee constantly economic resources not only to welfare system but also to the professional training and research, to spread and promote constantly the inclusion knowledge and the inclusive strategies. These are the common challenges for Slovenia as for Italy, as for other states who want to be inclusive and want to set plans and frameworks for inclusion. Schools and classrooms must be accessible for all and teachers have to be trained appropriately and in line with the long-life-learning approach. Today, with the spread of new media and ICT, setting a lesson for everybody is more simple than ever. For example, if we concern about reading impairments, we have the chance to use books in digitalized formats that allow pupils to achieve knowledge in different ways, like: audio or video, with a personalized graphical display, adapted to every

6 Janez Drobnič Dalla, "How students with special needs should be educated" in Nikoleta Gutvajn, Milja Vujačić editors, *Challenges and Perspectives of Inclusive Education*, Belgrado 2016, p.75.

special need. Furthermore, with additional supports like laptops or tablets and software that help students with learning difficulties in reading, writing, math and other subjects, pupils with SEN can do their practice, explore the content of curriculum, learn the same topics in a different way and access information like everybody. Additionally, there are many studies and research about didactics, pedagogies, psychologies that enhance teaching strategies. Teachers and educators can use cooperative learning, peer tutoring, cognitive strategies and so forth. (7)

In conclusion, the quality of inclusion obviously depends upon many aspects: legislative frameworks, financial resources, spread of ICT and assistive technology devices; it depends on the school system, teachers and educators, but it is also very important to never forget that it depends on culture and society.

Inclusion is a reciprocal process that enriches and promotes personal development, as it requires empathic vigilance of the individual and of the society. With the tendency for social cohesiveness, mutual care, looking for common good and changing in terms of removing obstacles it promotes diverse and multi-sensory learning, creativity, and progress both in education and in society in general. (8)

In my personal opinion – why I support the inclusive education system

I was born in the eighties, during my schooling, from primary up to secondary education, I often came into contact with different kind of learning difficulties, such as: motor, hearing and visual disabilities, intellectual or other specific learning disabilities. Furthermore, at the university I attended classes with “special people” as well. 12,400 disabled students have enrolled in Italian universities by 2006, when I started my studies. While I was a student, I also worked as a tutor for a few of them: I looked after them, we studied together and I prepared them for the exams. I could not say that it is always simple to get into contact and interact, but I have noticed that many of them have developed their skills and personality, found their place in the world, and now they are working or studying and actively contributing to society, becoming a development factor for everybody. Certainly, it is essential to get into education as soon as possible and take action quickly and effectively, supporting social life and learning opportunities, for disadvantaged people as for families and peer-groups. In this way, we can be reasonably sure that they can expand their group of friends and

7 David Michell, *What Really Works in Special and Inclusive education*, Routledge, London-NewYork 2014.

8 Vanja Kiswarday, *The Process of Implementing Inclusion in Slovenia*, Faculty of Education, University of Primorska, p.20.

develop their own project of life. This goal is not reached with separation, segregation and isolation from real society: that was the main attitude in the past. So I believe that it is important to boost the idea of inclusive education because it is the only way to learn how to approach learning difficulties and learning how to manage diversities and changes in life. This is to prepare pupils to approach the complexity of the contemporary world. This is the best way to grow better in society and not only from a moral or ethic point of view but also from an economical and progressive one.

Quotes and useful link

David Michell, *What Really Works in Special and Inclusive education*, Routledge, London-NewYork 2014.

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The Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education, UNESCO 1994: “http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF”.

Eurydice Network “https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Main_Page”.

Republic of Slovenia at “<http://www.vlada.si/en/>”.