

From Marginality to the Culture of Inclusion in the History of Italian Schools

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The paper analyses the evolution of the Italian model of integration and inclusion of people with disabilities, highlighting its historical and cultural roots. In about forty years, Italy has built an inclusive school system recognized internationally, based on the progressive overcoming of segregating logics and the affirmation of citizenship rights. This path is divided into three main phases: from marginality to insertion, from insertion to integration and, finally, to inclusion. In the initial phase, a welfare and medicalized vision of disability prevail, which leads to the spread of separative models, such as special schools and differential classes. A first significant change is achieved with the affirmation of the constitutional principles of equality and the right to education for all, which paved the way for greater attention to school access. Starting from the seventies, a process of opening the common school also to pupils with disabilities began, marking the transition towards a more participatory conception of the educational experience. Then the integration phase develops, which enhances the person as a whole and promotes collaboration between school, family and services. In recent decades, the paradigm of inclusion has been affirmed, shifting attention to the entire educational system, called upon to transform itself to accommodate diversity. The Italian model is thus configured as a system that values differences and promotes the participation of all.

Keywords: inclusion, education, disability, school, participation, rights

When looking at the experience of integration and inclusion in Italy, it is essential to consider the historical and cultural context in which this experience was born and developed. In almost 40 years, the country has built a model that represents one of the most significant examples in the world of recognition of full citizenship for people with disabilities (Merlo, 2015). What emerges is the extent of this phenomenon: It has involved all types of disabilities and has affected, albeit with differences, the entire public school system, at all levels. It is a long and complex path, full of experiences, skills, and great human commitment.

Today this history constitutes a stable and shared point of reference, which can hardly be questioned. The evolution of laws and regulations concerning people with disabilities in Italy tells how the way of understanding disability itself has changed over time, both socially and culturally. School and *welfare* policies in recent decades reflect the level of attention and sensitivity reached by society towards social and school inclusion (Elia, 2013). This path, however, has not always been linear: It has been characterized by inconsistencies, ideological influences and legitimate demands, oscillating between improvised interventions and more consolidated practices.

Precisely for this reason, it becomes essential to analyse and reinterpret the different phases of its evolution, which have shown significant tension on the human, social, and scientific level (Elia, 2013).

From Marginality to Inclusion

The reflection on inclusive processes in Italy is linked to a long and dense regulatory and legislative history that over time has changed the conception of disability in favour of an extraordinary recognition of full emancipation and scholastic and social participation of people with disabilities.

The first regulations, such as the Gentile reform of 1923 (Royal Decree No. 3196 of 31/12/1923) which extended compulsory schooling to the blind and deaf within special schools or separate classes, provided that they were not subject to other pathologies, marked the beginning of state intervention in this area, but also introduced forms of separation, such as differential classes. In those years, pupils with difficulties were often removed from ordinary school and social contexts to be placed in special structures, considered more appropriate to their conditions.

This approach reflects a vision of care: The pupil with disabilities is perceived as a sick person to be kept away from the school and social contexts of natural belonging.

A fundamental feature of these first reforms of a separate institution is that of keeping disabled pupils on the margins: the expression of a minority life and victims of serious disparities and inequalities (cf. Pavone, 2001).

An important change took place after the Second World War, with the birth of the Republic and the drafting of the Constitution of 1948. It represents a fundamental turning point, as it introduces the basic principle of democratic schooling, equality, and enshrines the right to education for all. In fact, the entire first part of the primary source of our regulatory system is dedicated to the rights and duties of citizens. Thus, Article 2, with the affirmation that “the Republic recognizes and guarantees the inviolable rights of man, both as an individual and in the social formations where his personality develops”, implicitly emphasizes the pre-eminent value of *self-determination* (Belli, 2014, p. 151) as an essential component for the free construction of the personality, then reiterated in Article 3. Self-determination is in fact a principle of reference and implementation of all democratic legislation and is one of the fundamental rights for all citizens and therefore also for the person with disabilities. In this rich and significant provision, the principles of *freedom* and *equality* are clearly contemplated, recognized to all citizens and extended to their “equal social dignity” (p. 13). “All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, personal and social conditions”¹ (cf. Friso, 2019).

This is a principle of formal equality that would risk remaining, at least in part, a pure theoretical affirmation if it were not supplemented by a presupposition of substantial equality: “It is the task of the Republic to remove obstacles of an economic and social nature which, by limiting the freedom and equality of citizens, impede the full development of the human person and effective participation”² (cf. Friso, 2019).

In short, the Constitution has always recognized that it is not enough to legally establish the principle of equality of citizens, when there are economic and social obstacles that effectively limit their equality by preventing it from being effective. It is therefore the duty of the state to remove these obstacles, so that all citizens can be placed on the same starting point, can have the same opportunities, that is, can enjoy, all on an equal

¹ Art. 3, Paragraph 1 of the Italian Constitution: The Constituent Assembly wanted to combine the right to education with the principle of equality.

² Art. 3, Paragraph 2, Italian Constitution.

footing, the same rights formally legitimized to them. Therefore, not only is man the supreme good to be protected, but it is necessary to guarantee him the possibility of being able to carry out his evolutionary process so that he becomes a mature citizen, able to participate, and contribute to the formation of social life (Piazza, 2023, p. 51). It is thus confirmed that, in Italy, the reflections and operational practices related to disability are in fact, in their significant evolutionary path, based precisely on the constitutional dictate, where, although there are no rules of immediate application regarding the inclusion of disabled people, there are nevertheless precise references to the right of all to education, instruction, professional training, work and assistance: full recognition of the right to freedom and equality understood, in a broad sense, as a training path that leads the individual to the fullness of his or her potential (p. 52).

In the 1960s, a further change took place: The state began to deal more directly with people with disabilities but continued to do so through a separate system. Special structures are strengthened and differential and upgrade classes are introduced, maintaining an isolation logic. In this period, moreover, disability is mainly interpreted in a medical key, as a “disease” to be diagnosed and treated. At the end of the 60s and the beginning of the 70s, thanks to cultural and social movements, a heated debate developed that questioned this model. The first experiences of inclusion of pupils in ordinary classes were born, even if initially in a spontaneous and unstructured way (Bosio & Menegoi Buzzi, 2005; Rossini, 2001).

A decisive turning point came with Law No. 118 of 1971, which recognized for the first time the right of pupils with disabilities to attend public school in ordinary classes, except in particularly serious cases. This step marks the start of a new model based on inclusion and participation.

From an educational point of view, the perspective is also broadened: not only learning counts, but also socialization, which becomes a fundamental objective of the school. However, limits and contradictions remain, especially for pupils with more severe disabilities, for whom integration is still difficult and sometimes hindered by restrictive interpretations of the rules (Elia, 2013).

Over time, the integration process continues to evolve, but not without difficulties. The entry of pupils with disabilities into ordinary schools requires profound changes: adaptation of spaces, elimination of architectural barriers, new teaching methods, and a different school organization. In this context, innovations such as full-time teaching (Law No. 820 of 24/09/1971) and more flexible teaching methods, such as group work and open classes, were introduced.

At the same time, a new social awareness is growing political movements; students and families promote a strong criticism of segregation in special schools, highlighting how it favours marginalization rather than inclusion.

Thus began a path that progressively led from the logic of marginality to that of integration, laying the foundations for a more inclusive school, capable of welcoming and valuing the differences of all students (Canevaro, 2000).

From Onboarding to Integration

Starting from the seventies, a significant cultural and social change developed that questioned educational models based on separation. The requests coming from political, social, and student movements, together with the demands of families, promote a broad process of public awareness, aimed at criticizing the logic of special institutions, held responsible for having contributed to strengthening conditions of exclusion and marginalization (Canevaro, 2013; D’Alessio, 2011).

In this context, a new conception of the person is progressively affirmed, which goes beyond the paradigm of homogeneity and rejects separation as a response to diversity. Everyone is recognized in his or her uniqueness, without hierarchies of value between differences. Integration is no longer interpreted as an adaptation to standardized models, but as a process aimed at enhancing individual potential within open and flexible educational contexts (Ianes & Cramerotti, 2013).

This change is based on a personalistic orientation, according to which the subject is an active protagonist of his or her own path of growth and integration. The result is an educational perspective centered not on lack, but on the resources and abilities of the person, enhancing the relational, communicative and participatory dimensions.

The school, in this framework, takes on a central role, configuring itself as an inclusive environment and a space for global development. Integration thus becomes a dynamic and continuous process, which requires the joint involvement of the different educational and social actors and a profound revision of teaching and organizational practices (Elia, 2013). Integration cannot be delegated exclusively to specialist figures but requires the active and coordinated participation of all the subjects involved: teachers, managers, families, and local operators, to ensure a real enhancement of the student's potential in his or her educational path (Canevaro, 2013).

Law No. 517 of 1977 represents, in this sense, a fundamental step, as it laid the foundations for a school open to all, capable of overcoming selective models and making effective the right to study enshrined in the Constitution. Subsequent regulatory interventions have progressively strengthened this orientation, extending the right to integration even to the highest levels of education and promoting a broader vision of the educational process (Nocera, 2010). In addition, we are witnessing a redefinition of the concept of learning, which is no longer understood exclusively as the acquisition of content, but as the result of the interaction between cognitive, affective and relational factors. In this sense, the social dimension of learning takes on a central role, contributing significantly to the overall development of the person and his or her inclusion in the social context (Pavone, 2014). Overall, the regulatory and cultural evolution of the Italian school system highlights the transition from a deficit-centered model to a perspective oriented towards the enhancement of individual skills and potential, laying the foundations for an increasingly inclusive and participatory culture of integration.

Starting from the introduction of Law No. 517 of 1977, the Italian school system began a progressive and structured process of integration, supported by a regulatory evolution aimed at definitively overcoming the segregating model. In this phase, legislation does not limit itself to regulating the inclusion of pupils with disabilities in the school context but extends attention to the overall needs of the person, considered in his or her relational dimension and in the social context to which he or she belongs (Canevaro, d'Alonzo, & Ianes, 2009).

A new educational perspective is thus affirmed that attributes to the school not only the task of guaranteeing access to education, but also that of promoting a path of global growth. In this direction, the concept of "life project" emerges for the first time, understood as a coherent integration between school, family, and social experiences, aimed at the harmonious development of the person (Pavone, 2014). A central role in this process is assumed by coordination between institutions: The ministerial circulars of the eighties in fact promote a network logic that involves schools, local authorities, and health services, called upon to collaborate in the definition and implementation of educational interventions. In this framework, the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) is introduced and consolidated, as a fundamental tool for personalized planning and for the achievement of educational and social objectives (D'Alonzo, 2018). Within this integrated system, the figure of the support teacher takes on particular importance, who is configured not only as a specialist in educational

intervention, but also as a mediator between the different actors involved in the integration process. Its function is carried out both in the individualized didactic design and in the promotion of inclusive practices within the class group (Ianes, 2015). Overall, this evolution marks the transition from a conception centered on assistance to a model based on participation and recognition of the person's potential, laying the foundations for a culture of integration understood as a systemic and shared process.

In the process of school integration, coordination between the various institutional subjects involved plays a fundamental role. Collaboration between operators of educational institutions and territorial services is an essential element, particularly in the phases of the student's transition between the different school levels and in the definition of the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), as a key tool for individualized educational planning. In this perspective, the figure of the support teacher acquires a central position within the school system. It requires specific methodological skills that allow educational interventions to be designed, monitored, and evaluated effectively. The support teacher, while maintaining a specialized function, operates within a collegial context, contributing to the construction of an inclusive environment and encouraging the active participation of the student in the class group (Ianes, 2015; D'Alonzo, 2018). The integration process, however, cannot be traced back exclusively to the action of this professional figure, but must be understood as a shared responsibility of the entire school community. All educational actors are called upon to collaborate to achieve a common goal, represented by the full integration of the pupil with disabilities within the educational and social context. A further regulatory development was recorded at the end of the eighties, when the right to integration was extended to the last levels of education. In fact, the ministerial provisions of the time guarantee students with disabilities the possibility of accessing upper secondary school, thus completing the path of inclusion within the school system (Nocera, 2010). This evolution was systematized organically with the approval of Law No. 104 of 1992, which represents the main regulatory reference about integration and rights of people with disabilities. It establishes the recognition of the person as a subject with rights and promotes an integrated model of intervention, based on cooperation between school, family, and social-health services (Canevaro, 2013).

Law No. 104 of 1992 represents a fundamental step in the process of consolidating the Italian model of integration, as it introduces a systemic vision of disability and fully recognizes its social dimension. In fact, with Law 104 of 1992, it is a matter of defining a new phase for disability which, as Luigi D'Alonzo would say, we can well describe as the "phase of integrative attention". "The object of the individual actions concerns full respect for human dignity, the rights of freedom, autonomy; full integration into the family, school, work and society [...]" (Lascioli, 2007, p. 558).

It is not limited to guaranteeing rights in the field of welfare and education, but promotes an integrated approach aimed at promoting the autonomy, participation and inclusion of the person in social and working life (Nocera, 2010; Canevaro, 2013). A qualifying element of the legislation is represented by the strengthening of collaboration between school and social and health services, to build coordinated and effective educational interventions. In this perspective, school integration is no longer conceived as a process limited to the educational context, but as part of a broader project that involves the personal, relational, and social dimension of the individual (Pavone, 2014). In continuity with this approach, the Presidential Decree of 24 February 1994 defines in a more precise way the role of health services, called upon to collaborate with the school in the planning of interventions. In this context, the value of the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) is further consolidated, intended as a central document for the definition of individualized educational paths, built since the

characteristics and specific needs of the student. The IEP therefore assumes a strategic function, as it allows the integration and coordination of the various educational and rehabilitation actions, ensuring consistency and continuity in the training course. However, despite regulatory progress, the integration process continues to present critical issues in terms of application, linked to the difficulty of translating legislative principles into effective and shared operating practices.

A particularly important step in the process of evolution of the Italian school system is represented by the introduction of Law No. 59 of 15 March 1997, which establishes the autonomy of educational institutions. This measure, called the enabling law, gives legal personality to schools and gives them greater decision-making capacity in the teaching, organisational, and administrative fields, favouring the adoption of flexible strategies aimed at achieving integration objectives (Canevaro, D'Alonzo, & Ianes, 2009). In this framework, educational institutions are called upon to design individualized educational paths, capable of responding adequately to the needs of pupils with disabilities, enhancing their potential and promoting their full participation in school life. Autonomy thus becomes a functional tool for the development of inclusive practices and the concrete implementation of the principle of integration.

At the end of the nineties, the debate on school integration reopened, highlighting some critical issues related to the quality of services, teacher training, and territorial disparities. Significant differences emerge between the different areas of the country, which affect the effectiveness of inclusive processes and the ability of institutions to respond adequately to the needs of students (Pavone, 2014). In this context, Law No. 104 of 1992 continues to represent the main regulatory reference, introducing a conception of disability as a social phenomenon, linked not only to individual conditions, but also to life contexts. It highlights how situations of disadvantage and marginalization derive from the interaction between the person and the environment, laying the foundations for an inclusive approach based on overcoming barriers and valuing differences (Nocera, 2010).

From Integration to Inclusion

The brief regulatory excursus presented here allows us to reflect on the current Italian situation regarding integration (even today the two provisions enunciated represent the only ones who intervene to regulate the daily practices of school integration), from which it emerges that the attention to the educational and educational problems of people with disabilities has gradually transformed with the maturation of social awareness of their rights, and with greater attention to their potential: They are recognized, at least juridically as active members of society, an irreducible value whatever the existential variety with which their humanity is manifested. Today, therefore, despite the undeniable difference in quality in integration processes, our country's efforts are increasingly moving in the direction of an integrated pedagogical model that offers every student the opportunity to access, without exclusion, the common school service. For a long time now, in Italy, the importance of implementing, in the classroom and at school, educational processes based on social and relational coexistence. This is a fact that must necessarily be enhanced, because it is synonymous with an unprecedented civil and cultural progress that leads to understanding, even today, the importance of a common context that becomes responsible for the realization of each one, to experience the complexity of an inclusive context willing to evolve, to change, for a diversity that is an integral part of the natural state itself (Striano, 2014, p. 37).

As we have seen, the issue of social inclusion represents a central issue in national EU policies that have been pursuing, for some time now, an integrated vision between discrimination, protection of the autonomy and dignity of disabled people and commitment to education and training. This is an emerging concern that places

more and more emphasis on the problem of the right to participation, closely linking the issues of social justice and democracy with that of disability, which is no longer defined in terms of ontological terms, so to speak, but of a functional relationship with the context (Paparella & Rocca, 2010, p. 66), which—depending on how it is configured—is more or less able to guarantee well-being and quality of life, through that logic of ecological-systemic complexity that marks the direct correspondence between the grammar that governs the whole and that which regulates the functioning of the parts (Paparella & Rocca, 2010, p. 66). Following the prospective evolution that legislation has fostered, it is evident that the current panorama that characterizes the Italian national reality as a whole is that of a disability “from a social perspective”, that is, a situation in which, alongside the elaboration of specific policies inspired by a strong sense of responsibility towards those who are now weaker, there is an awareness that the issue of inclusion is not at all separable from the problem of the social treatment of the differences and the needs for realization of the individual in a society that recognizes the plurality of paths of subjectivation.

It is possible, at this point, to recognize two main interpretations of the concept of inclusion itself: A first normative approach interprets its meaning in relation to the process of participation of disabled people in the common school and the respective educational support solutions; the second, what we can define as purely implementive, interprets the aforementioned inclusive principle in relation to the process of change of the ordinary education system in order to transform it into a learning community for all pupils. According to this renewed perspective, the focus of the intervention is no longer exclusively the pupil with difficulties, but the school and the type of interventions, individual and structural, capable of supporting the institution in responding to difference. There therefore seems to be no longer any doubt about what the training and educational environment of the subject in developmental age should be: the same school for all, which must not offer everyone either the same paths or the same tools. An emphasis that implies the recognition, acceptance, and management of diversity in the awareness that the construction of each person’s identity requires the acceptance and confirmation of his or her individuality (Elia, 2013, p. 27). This is an important change of perspective that is striking for two important aspects: on the one hand, the completeness of the regulations that currently safeguard the development and education of the disabled; on the other hand, for the depth of the principles on which these acts are based in order to recognize the dignity of the person with disabilities even if in a situation of maximum gravity.

In recent decades, the Italian education system has progressively abandoned the paradigm of standardized teaching, moving towards an inclusive conception based on the recognition of the plurality of educational needs and individual differences. In this perspective, inclusive teaching is no longer configured as a set of interventions aimed exclusively at pupils with disabilities, but as a pedagogical approach that involves the entire school community, promoting the educational success of all students (Canevaro, 2013; Pavone, 2014).

A fundamental step in this evolution is represented by *the Guidelines for the scholastic integration of pupils with disabilities* (MIUR, 2009), which introduce the ICF (International Classification of Functioning) model as a reference for the reading of disability in a bio-psycho-social key. This model, developed by the World Health Organization, makes it possible to overcome a vision centered on the deficit, enhancing the role of environmental and contextual factors in determining the conditions of participation and learning. In this framework, two key principles emerge: the consideration of diversity as a resource and the need to respond to the educational needs of each student (OMS, 2001; MIUR, 2009).

Subsequently, Law No. 170/2010 on Specific Learning Disorders (SLD) further consolidated the inclusive approach, recognizing the specificity of neurodevelopmental disorders such as dyslexia, dysorthography, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia, and introducing didactic and methodological tools aimed at ensuring equal training opportunities. In this context, the concepts of individualization and personalization take on a central role: the first oriented towards the achievement of common goals through diversified paths, the second aimed at enhancing individual talents through objectives and strategies calibrated to the individual student (Ianes, 2015; D'Alonzo, 2018).

Further development is recorded with the Ministerial Directive of 27 December 2012 on Special Educational Needs (SEN), which expands the field of inclusion by recognizing that each pupil can manifest specific needs, even in the absence of clinical certification, related to socio-cultural or environmental factors. This perspective marks a significant cultural turning point, as it extends the criteria of inclusive teaching to the entire school population, promoting flexible and personalized interventions (MIUR, 2012). Here one of the central concepts is that of extension (Ianes & Cramerotti, 2013, p. 10), understood as a broadening of the educational gaze towards the set of special educational needs in their complexity. This implies overcoming the sole logic of certifying disability, also including specific learning disorders, situations of socio-cultural disadvantage, and language difficulties of foreign students. In this perspective, personalized teaching is promoted that enhances individual differences and provides for the diversification of educational objectives, with the aim of developing and enhancing the skills of each student.

The regulatory framework is further strengthened by Legislative Decree 66/2017, amended by Legislative Decree 96/2019, which redefines the school inclusion system by giving greater centrality to the role of families and introducing governance tools such as Territorial Inclusion Groups and Operational Working Groups. In this context, the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) is confirmed as a fundamental tool for personalized educational planning, developed in a collegial way and oriented towards the global development of the person (Canevaro et al., 2009; Nocera, 2010).

Despite the historical difficulties in the transition from insertion to integration and, subsequently, to inclusion, the Italian experience stands out for having rooted this process within the school system, through the progressive abolition of special institutions and the inclusion of all pupils in ordinary classes. Today, inclusion represents not only a right, but a resource for the entire educational context, as it promotes the construction of learning environments based on participation, relationships, and the enhancement of differences. In this sense, the Italian model is configured as an integrated pedagogical paradigm, oriented towards the promotion of social coexistence and the full realization of everyone within an educating community (Medeghini et al., 2013; Ianes & Cramerotti, 2013).

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