

Does Mainstreaming Work? Teachers' Perspectives on Inclusive Education

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"The ultimate vision for inclusive education systems is to ensure that all learners of any age are provided with meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities in their local community, alongside their friends and peers"
(EASNIE, 2015, p.1)

Abstract. This paper presents the perspectives of teachers working in a vocational high school in Rome, considered a best practice for the success of its inclusion projects. The research adopted a phenomenological approach, according to which the focus of investigation is the study of subjective experience, and the comprehension of phenomena as they are lived and perceived by individuals. The research design was based on qualitative and participatory instruments such as in-depth interviews and field observations. Drawing mainly on data collected through interviews, the article describes teachers' viewpoints about the factors and managerial choices that contribute to the excellent results of the institution in the area of inclusion. The results are presented referring to relevant national and international scientific contributions about inclusive education and the effects of mainstreaming. The findings clearly show how effective school inclusion requires both top down and bottom up actions in order to create a supportive culture. When this requirement is met, a high number and variety of special needs represents an opportunity for the teaching staff to develop skills and competence.

Keywords: inclusive education; mainstreaming; disabilities; phenomenological research approach; case study.

Introduction

Starting in the late 1970s, the Italian government passed a set of legislative provisions known as *integrazione scolastica*. Separate special education classes were abolished and all students were admitted into mainstream schools,

regardless of any disability, impairment, or any other personal characteristic or social circumstance. The Italian model seems to be an ideal context for the development of inclusive education when compared to other realities in Europe and in the world, where, in some cases, special schools and/or classes are still the only available options for students with disabilities or impairments. Does such perception correspond to reality?

This paper aims to discuss the Italian model of inclusive education and, specifically, the choice of mainstreaming for all students, regardless of any physical or mental impairment. The analysis is enriched by presenting the viewpoints of teachers in a vocational high school in Rome, considered a best practice for the success of its inclusion projects.

Overview of the Italian inclusive education model

As a result of the legislative path towards school inclusion started in the 1970s, today in Italy nursery schools, schools, universities and any other education institutions, including private ones, are obligated to accept pupils with disabilities. Moreover, all children with a certification of disability have the right to be supported in learning by a professional. When law 517 was passed in 1977, all differentiated classes were closed down and specialized support teachers (*insegnanti di sostegno*) started to work in the public schools. The support teachers are supposed to work in conjunction with the health system operators and the classroom teachers to elaborate an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) for each pupil who has a certification from the local public health unit. They support pupils with certified disabilities in their didactic and socialization process, as well as the subject matter teachers to facilitate dialogue and integration of the students with disabilities in the class.

In Italian schools there are three different categories for students with special needs. *Alunno con sostegno* is the student whose family formally requested a certification and a support teacher. The request is based on a medical diagnosis of mental or physical disability. This is the only case in which the student can be assigned an *insegnante di sostegno*. A second case of special need is described by the acronym DSA (*disturbi specifici dell'apprendimento*), specific learning impairments such as dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyslexia. The family needs to put forward a request to have this type of special need recognized, in addition to providing a medical certification. Finally, a third type of special need is referred to as BES (*Bisogni educativi speciali*), in a broad sense. In this case, there is no role played by the family in requesting additional support, but the decision is made by the school, based on linguistic, socio-economic and/or behavioral difficulties. Students with BES may have different types of disadvantage not certified by health institutions.

Only when a pupil possesses a statement of disability he/she can be assigned an *insegnante di sostegno* for a number of hours per week decided by the school and based on funding allocated by the Ministry of Education. However, students who are certified as DSA or BES are responsibility of all teachers and of the *insegnante di sostegno*, if present in the class. Another difference can be found in the didactic organization. While *alunni con sostegno* are assigned a specific IEP, that is a very detailed document containing medical information, results of behavioral observations and pedagogical reflections/guidelines, *alunni DSA* and

BES have a Personalized Didactic Plan (PDP), a sort of “contract” between the family and the school, regulating expected actions and behaviors to reach educational goals.

For the *alunni con sostegno*, there can be three different types of IEP depending on the residual ability: *programmazione di classe* (class planning) means that the student follows the same syllabus as the other students in the class; *programmazione semplificata* (simplified planning) refers to minimum requirements established for each discipline, while *programmazione differenziata* (differentiated planning) indicates that the school has to prepare an *ad hoc* syllabus for the student.

It is important to mention that the support teacher in the Italian model should not be considered as assigned to a student; rather, they are assigned to a class and should foster mutual understanding among students and teachers. The support teacher is therefore a crucial component of the school staff who contributes meaningfully to the creation of a positive environment and climate for inclusion. In addition to the support teacher, there are three other roles to be mentioned. The *assistente specialistico* (specialized assistant) is assigned to the student, or to more than one student, depending on the needs, and has the responsibility of helping in everyday life and socialization activities, removing the obstacles that the student faces due to their impairments and working towards their autonomy and independence. The *assistente di base* (paraprofessional) is assigned to students who are not self sufficient and is in charge of all their practical needs, such as ensuring that the student can move inside the school buildings, helping them to use the bathroom, to eat, etc. An *assistente alla comunicazione* (communication assistant) might be assigned, for example, to a deaf or blind student and in this case they might need to know sign language or the Braille system.

Does mainstreaming work?

Starting from the late 1970s, Italy made a political and ideological choice when deciding to educate all children together in mainstream schools. This choice was made long before other European and non European countries even started thinking about inclusive education. At that time, there was little research on the topic, while now we can refer to several national and international scientific works to justify the choice made more than 40 years ago, even if empirical research appears to still be insufficient to give educators and policymakers solid methodological guidelines (Cottini, 2017).

Vianello and Di Nuovo (2015), and Cottini (2017), present an overview of the most important research projects carried out in the field of inclusive education, in Italy and worldwide. Several studies investigate the opinions of different stakeholders, such as teachers, peers, and parents, about including all students in mainstream schools (Gidlung, 2018; Moalli *et al.*, 2006; Vianello & Moalli, 2001; Balboni & Pietrabissi, 2000; Vianello & Mognato, 2000; Vianello, Mognato & Moalli, 2000; Cornoldi *et al.*, 1998; Castellini, Mega & Vianello, 1995; Diamond, Le Furgy, & Blass, 1992; Vianello, 1990; Brunati & Soresi, 1990; Vianello, 1990; Bak & Siperstein, 1987; Mantovani, 1978). Other studies investigate the state of the art of school integration, strengths and weaknesses of the model and areas of potential development (Cottini, 2017; D’Alessio, 2011; Gherardini, Nocera,

AIPD, 2000; Canevaro, D'Alonzo & Ianes, 2009). A third group of studies aims to assess real benefits obtained by including everyone in mainstream classes, considering both the didactic and the socialization aspect (Cottini, 2017; Vianello, 2008, 2012; Vianello & Lanfranchi, 2009, 2011, 2015; Vianello & Di Nuovo, 2015; McDonnell *et al.*, 2003; Cole *et al.*, 2004).

I will focus in this paper on the first group of studies, and in particular on those that investigate the opinions of teachers. The results of these studies are similar. In general, teachers believe that including students with disabilities in mainstream schools and classes has a positive impact on the students themselves and also on their peers, but at the same time they think that more training and financial resources are necessary in order to implement inclusion policies effectively. Italian teachers have, in average, better attitudes than teachers from other countries towards inclusion of students with disabilities, and among them support teachers (*insegnanti di sostegno*) have better attitudes towards disability than subject matter teachers. The length of a teacher's experience and the number of hours spent with the students with disabilities are crucial factors: the longer the experience, and the more hours together, the fewer problems are reported: knowing each other well is a crucial factor for the success of inclusion practices. The type of disability also impacts teachers' attitude: physical disabilities are considered less problematic than mental disabilities, and disabilities that are better known (such as Down Syndrome) tend to be considered less problematic than others. Teachers' attention is directed mostly towards behavioural aspects (Gidlung, 2018): in absence of behavioural issues, teachers' attitudes are more positive.

What kind of “inclusive classes” are really inclusive?

We have, at this point, evidence showing that the steps taken so far in Italy to realize inclusion in education have reached meaningful results. Currently, 98% of students with disabilities attend mainstream schools in Italy (Ianes, 2015). But what happens every day in the classrooms? It is very important to observe daily life in Italian schools in order to assess whether students with disabilities actually spend most of their time in class. And, even when they do spend most of their time in class, we must ask ourselves if the idea of individualized didactic planning corresponds to reality, or if we should rather talk about “individual” planning. The literature describes, in fact, «push and pull out mechanisms» that might determine exclusion processes. In the first case, the student with a disability is “pushed out” from class because, for example, the teaching style is not suitable for him/her and not conducive to learning. In the second case, the student is “pulled out” from his/her class due, for example, to the presence of a classroom dedicated to students with disabilities and adequately furnished for them.

Even when the students are physically in class, some authors talk about «micro-exclusions», as being there does not necessarily mean participating in the group activities (D'Alessio *et al.*, 2015; D'Alessio, 2011). An example of micro-exclusion is when the didactic planning for the whole class and that for the student with a disability are not in any way connected. Another example is when students take the standardized tests for the Italian National Institute for the Evaluation of

Schools (INVALSI) and the students with disabilities are excluded, or their tests are simply not sent back to the institution (Zanobini, 2013; D'Alessio, 2011).

Finally, the presence of the support teacher can be a factor of micro-exclusion, if the perception is that of a one-to-one relationship and not that of having an additional resource for the whole class (Ianes, 2006). Incorrect practices and habits might accentuate this perception: for example, some demonstrated that, in many cases, drafting the IEP ends up being the responsibility of the support teacher alone and not, as it should be, of a group of people with different roles (Gherardini & Nocera, 2000; Canevaro *et al.* 2011).

How could we deal with such issues? There are, in the literature, two types of answer to this question. Some experts advocate for possible improvements of the current model and practices. Basically, they believe that if the norms are better applied by the school system, inclusion will reach its highest potential. For example, Cottini (2017; 2014) believes that the role of support teachers as coordinators of resources for inclusion should be strengthened, as should their technical training about different types of disabilities. Other experts think that deep structural reforms are necessary in order to change the Italian education system as a whole and make it more inclusive, starting from a redefinition of the theoretical premises and assumptions on the issue of disability (D'Alessio *et al.*, 2015; Ianes, 2015; D'Alessio, 2011; Treelle *et al.*, 2011). Several proposals have been put forth. Some think that it would be important to overcome the distinction between subject matter and support teachers, modifying the education and training requirements and introducing mixed positions: half of the hours as subject matter teachers and half as support teachers (Ianes, 2015). The recent reforms did not go in this direction, since the path to become subject matter teachers is still different from the one to become a support teacher¹. Some experts have criticized this choice because, in their view, it will make the collaboration between subject matter and support teachers even more difficult, threatening the positive results of inclusion.

According to several scholars, inclusion policies and strategies need improvements mainly in the following areas: the link between individualized planning and the class curriculum; classmates' and schoolmates' involvement; integration of behavioral strategies into the regular learning activities; meta-cognitive teaching and learning; and information and communication technology.

As to the first area, an essential component of good-quality inclusion is a close link between the IEP and the general curriculum of the whole classroom (Cottini, 2017). It is important to define objectives that are appropriate for the student with a disability, that are within their zone of proximal development and that, in this way, make their participating with peers to classroom activities significant. However, adapting curriculum objectives to the needs of a specific student might be challenging. Different levels of adaptation are possible: changing the input/output codes (e.g. listening instead of reading; typewriting instead of handwriting etc.); changing the teaching/learning methodologies (e.g.

¹ After the approval of the reform *La Buona Scuola* (Law 107/2015), the path to become a specialized support teacher in lower or upper secondary school entails three steps: a university master's degree (3 years, then 2 years), a *concorso* (national public examination) and a 3 year training (*FIT: formazione iniziale e tirocinio*).

teaching/learning by role-playing); simplifying the content (e.g. providing shorter texts to read); identifying basics of each discipline (e.g. learning history by exploring the student's personal life); or proposing hands-on educational activities (Ianes, 2006).

As far as peer involvement is concerned, the importance of educating all students to accept and value individual differences is emphasized by several authors (Cottini, 2017; Ianes, 2006). This is the way to keep a far-sighted perspective on the disabled students' adult life and develop around them a supporting community. Many strategies are available for this purpose, such as cooperative learning methods, to be introduced after a climate of sharing, mutual help and support has been built, both in the classroom and outside of it. Another form of peer engagement widely used is peer tutoring, both within and outside the classroom. In the secondary school especially, many students support peers with disabilities in learning academic and social skills and help them in their integration process.

The third and fourth very important areas of improvement for school inclusion practices concern development of behavior analysis and meta-cognitive teaching strategies in the regular classroom activities. Many schools, for example, are bringing into the classrooms several components of behavioral approaches for autistic disorders, such as TEACCH², benefitting all pupils – and not only those with autistic spectrum disorders – in developing self-regulation skills. As far as meta-cognitive instruction is concerned, during the past twenty years groups of academics, researchers and teachers have designed and developed many different teaching curricula that schools can administer to support the development of cognitive, meta-cognitive and academic skills (e.g. study skills, memory skills, attention, reading skills, spatial orientation, etc.).

The last area of improvement relates to information and communication technology, where instructional software specifically designed for learners with special education needs and disabilities should be developed and made available for schools.

Methodology

This article describes and analyzes the context of a vocational high school in the city of Rome, focused on agriculture and farming (*Istituto Tecnico Agrario Statale*, from now on ITAS) that has become a benchmark for school integration practices, both at the local and national level. During school year 2016-2017, I developed a case study (Zanazzi, 2018b) conducting on-site field observations and interviewing 32 key stakeholders³, asking them which factors favored or

² TEACCH stands for Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication related Handicapped Children. It is a training program for individuals of all ages and skill levels with autism spectrum disorders, based on the premise that people with autism are predominantly visual learners, therefore intervention strategies focus on physical and visual structure, schedules, work systems and task organization.

³ When the study was conducted, the school had 150 subject matter teachers, 70 support teachers, 40 specialized assistants and 50 administrative assistants. I interviewed the Principal, the Coordinator of Inclusion (who was also a support teacher), 7 support teachers, 5 subject matter teachers, 1 administrative assistant, 7 specialized assistants, 7 parents and 3 students. Participation to the project was on a voluntary basis.

hindered inclusion in their work environment. Here I will focus specifically on the interviews with the Principal and 13 staff, divided among subject matter and support teachers: their views on inclusion and mainstreaming, and their field experience, will enrich the theoretical reflection on school inclusion presented in the previous paragraphs. The following table displays the main information about the 14 interviewees whose perspectives are analyzed in this article.

Table 1: The participants

Role	Years of experience in school	Years of experience at ITAS
School Headmaster	>30	12
Coordinator of inclusion and support teacher	>20	6
Support teacher 1	< 10	6
Support teacher 2	< 10	7
Support teacher 3	< 20	3
Support teacher 4	>30	9
Support teacher 5	< 5	2
Support teacher 6	>20	13
Support teacher 7	>30	5
Subject matter teacher 1	>20	15
Subject matter teacher 2	>20	4
Subject matter teacher 3	< 5	2
Subject matter teacher 4	>10	6
Subject matter teacher 5	< 10	3

The research adopted a phenomenological approach, according to which the focus of investigation is the study of subjective experience, and the comprehension of phenomena as they are lived and perceived by individuals (Mortari & Zannini, 2017). The research design was based on qualitative and participatory instruments such as in-depth interviews and field observations. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The contents were then coded and analyzed using NVivo, a software for qualitative analysis, particularly helpful for non-structured research designs in which data collection and analysis go hand-in-hand, and the ultimate goal is to investigate subjective lived experience. NVivo allows to create content “nodes” before starting the analysis, from a previously agreed upon list of categories to investigate, or during the analysis, letting the categories emerge from data. In this project, I used both options: the semi-structured interview protocol generated some conceptual nodes, while other nodes emerged from spontaneous reflections and opinions expressed by the participants. The following section will present the results of 14 in-depth interviews, focusing specifically on the interactions among the legislative framework, the school’s policies and practices, and the teachers’ attitudes and beliefs.

Teachers’ perspectives

Out of more than 900 students enrolled in ITAS during school year 2016-2017, about 300 had special educational needs. The Principal firmly believed that the

high number of students with disabilities and special needs was not an obstacle to high quality teaching and learning for all students. Rather, over the years, the school management had been very effective in communicating to all families the importance of inclusion and solidarity. Moreover, the school faculty had been able to demonstrate that having many students with special needs does not necessarily imply modifying the syllabi of the courses or decreasing the level of skills and competence. On the contrary, the need for individualized planning translates into a better trained teaching staff and a wider variety of educational opportunities offered to all students. In this sense, inclusion at ITAS seemed to achieve what Barton has called the «celebration of difference» (Barton, 1998, p.80).

The school is located just outside the Rome city center and has its own farm, with vegetable gardens, greenhouses, fruit trees, an olive tree grove and a vineyard. There are also horse stables where a private company offers horse-back riding classes. Animal breeding is one of the main activities of the farm, which also produces and sells fresh cheese and milk. Vegetables, olive oil and meat are also sold through institutional channels. At a first sight, the school appears as the ideal environment for experiential learning and for establishing connections between what is taught in class and the real farming work.

Positive internal/external factors

During the interviews, 12 out of 13 teachers mentioned the physical environment itself, the natural resources, the presence of a real farm and the availability of professionals such as farmers, breeders, vets and biologists, as among the first internal factors that positively impacted on the effectiveness of inclusion practices. In fact, having these unusual resources made individualized planning more realistic. The school adopted a policy according to which individualized planning considered the real capabilities of each student, clearly indicating which courses they could attend and which ones, on the contrary, would be unsuitable and therefore needed to be substituted with field activities. Step by step, over the five years, the students acquired more autonomy and the number of hours in class could be increased.

The majority of the teachers believed that another important factor for the success of inclusion at ITAS was the students themselves. Peer support was considered crucial for the wellbeing of students with disabilities or special needs. Teachers and staff were very careful to transmit a message of solidarity and creating an inclusive environment. Having the collaboration of peers means creating a network of positive relationships around each student with disabilities. This network grows and strengthens over the five years of school. It even has the potential to last after school and become a second family for the student. Every year, ITAS awards a prize to the students who, aside from their academic merit, have been more proactive and generous in supporting other students with disabilities or any kind of difficulties. The prize itself is not what motivates the students to be inclusive, but it is an effective way to communicate that being supportive is as important as being academically proficient.

The motivation and availability of the specialized assistants were also mentioned as an important factor by the majority of the teachers who participated in the research. In particular, the Principal had made some

recruiting choices that differentiated ITAS from other schools. Usually, the specialized assistants are hired by social cooperatives, not by the schools directly, and the schools entrust a cooperative to deliver the service. In this model, the specialized assistant receives less than half of the salary that they are entitled to, since the rest goes to the cooperative. Departing from this common arrangement, ITAS hires each specialized assistant directly, allowing them to receive a competitive salary and positively influencing their motivation.

Finally, most teachers emphasized during the interviews the professionalism and motivation demonstrated by their colleagues. The *bottom up* inclusive culture of the environment made teachers feel supported, and teamwork was a reality in everyday teaching practice.

Among the external factors that favored inclusion, a few teachers mentioned the neighborhood. The school area, as a matter of fact, was open to the public: anyone could enter and visit the farm, feed the animals, buy vegetables and the other available products. There was no fence and no limitations for the public to wander around and share the life of the school and the farm. This openness and movement of people fostered socialization and contrasted, ideally and practically, the idea of “isolation” that sometimes surrounds people with disabilities.

Negative internal/external factors

Let's now analyze the weakest points that emerged from the interviews with teachers and the Principal. Nearly all interviewed teachers reported that, sometimes, they had witnessed non constructive behaviors by colleagues and/or students. More specifically, a few support teachers said that subject matter teachers had not been open to the needs of students with disabilities in their classes and to collaborating with the support teachers. According to the participants, the reasons behind this “resistance” might have been the teachers' incapability to teach inclusively and/or their static view of disability as something that could not change with education. During field activities, some teachers might have been worried about students with special needs getting hurt, or breaking the equipment.

In some interviews, teachers reported to have witnessed exclusive behaviors by some students towards their peers with special needs. They believed that the main reason behind such behaviors was the leniency of some subject matter teachers towards them. This raises an important point about formative assessment and about the risk of distortions in evaluation when dealing with special educational needs.

Nearly half of the interviewees mentioned the families as obstacles to real inclusion, when they do not accept the disability of their child and they do not cooperate with the school staff, have excessive expectations or, on the contrary, little trust in the school staff.

Finally, among the most important hindering factors mentioned by participants was human resource management: first of all, insufficient training and, consequently, inadequate preparation of support teachers, and teachers in general, with specific reference to disabilities (including awareness and knowledge of different physical and mental impairments and/or pathologies), inclusion and inclusive teaching. Since public school teachers are government employees, most actions for improvement would require new legislation and/or

economic investment. The path to become a support teacher in Italy is long, requires strong motivation and resilience, and is likely to expose the candidates to many of the real issues one might encounter every day in school. And yet, this training path, no matter how long and selective, is insufficient to cope with the ever changing needs of a school system that wants to be really inclusive. Training opportunities should be provided, free of charge, by schools and associations, giving teachers and school staff the possibility to continuously update and increase their knowledge, open their minds to new perspectives, reflect on their practices and transform experience into real learning (Bochicchio, 2017). This is something that already happens in schools, but there seems to be no systemic vision; rather, initiatives are spread unevenly throughout the territory and often depend on the good will of school Principals and coordinators of inclusion. In addition to training teachers and school staff, the government should tackle the complex issue of regulating, from a legislative point of view, the profiles of assistants, whose role is essential, but not recognized by the law. Currently, there are not any formal requirements to become specialized assistants and communication assistants, although schools tend to hire out the selection processes to social cooperatives that recruit based on education and training credentials. This absence of formalization can translate into weaker recognition in the work environment, potentially threatening self-confidence and, ultimately, the quality of work. The constant reduction of funds for the assistants, together with the low salaries they earn for a demanding and delicate job, makes this area an absolute priority for the government in order to preserve the quality of school inclusion (Zanazzi, 2018a).

Table 2: Factors impacting on inclusion at ITAS

FACTORS		
POSITIVE	Internal	Principal's dedication and commitment to inclusion
		High number and variety of special needs
		Environment: role of nature and animals
		Peer involvement and support
		Specialized assistants: hired directly by the school = better pay and more motivation
	Teachers' professionalism and dedication	
	External	Neighborhood actively involved
NEGATIVE	Internal	Non constructive behaviors by teachers and students
		Non constructive behaviors by families
	External	Insufficient knowledge and preparation about types of disabilities
		Role of specialized assistant: not recognized by the laws
		Specialized assistants' salaries: too low

Cultivating inclusion

Walking across the beautiful park in which the school is nestled, and looking at the vegetable gardens, the vineyards and the olive tree grove, it was impossible not to think about the practice of “cultivating” and the effort, dedication, perseverance it takes to grow any living being. The viewpoints of teachers involved in the research project describe inclusive practices as the work of a well directed orchestra, in which they take part, showing a form of artistic passion and personal commitment. It is clear that the respect of laws, regulations and norms is essential, but not sufficient to make inclusion real every day. There needs to be a top-down strong message on the value of diversity as a resource, as well as bottom-up shared beliefs and values that inform and permeate daily behaviors. Sometimes, it is necessary to adapt the general rule to a single unique situation: ideological, “integralist” approaches might turn into obstacles to participation and learning, while flexibility and individualized paths can pave the way for gradual improvement and increasing involvement of pupils with disabilities and special needs. In the environment described in this article, the natural resources, the spaces and the proximity with the neighborhood make individualized planning more realistic and feasible by planning outdoor, hands-on activities accessible to pupils with different degrees and types of impairments. In more traditional, class-centered programs the creativity of the teachers would need to be even more challenged in order to balance mainstreaming with effective learning.

All in all, the success of school inclusion at ITAS depends on a mix of personal and structural factors that keep legislation and educational practices together in harmony. While the dedication of the people is admirable and definitely a positive factor, it cannot be taken for granted, especially if we consider the lack of systemic policies and the insufficient supply of good quality, accessible and training opportunities for teachers and assistants. Effective inclusion begins from training and valuing the people who are there to “make” it. While ITAS reaped the benefits of a dedicated team and physical environment naturally conducive to inclusive practices, it is important to be aware that such conditions are not the norm in Italian schools.

Conclusion

The results of this study show how effective school inclusion requires both top down and bottom up actions in order to create a supportive culture. When this requirement is met, a high number and variety of special needs represents an opportunity for the teaching staff to develop skills and competence. An inclusive culture can develop only if and when inclusion is a shared responsibility, not only among the staff, but also among the students. Moreover, effective inclusion requires policies to train and reward staff members who are bound to realize it. Last, but not least, an inclusive culture is more likely to develop when the physical environment in which the school is located and the facilities allow pupils to express their diverse abilities and to interact with a variety of people. However, even in an environment where inclusion seems to be deeply ingrained in people’s values, beliefs and behaviors, as well as in educational practices, there might still be obstacles, criticalities and large areas of improvement, some of which determined by the legislative framework, some others by people’s

attitudes and preconceptions. Therefore, the commitment of all stakeholders to inclusion is a never ending process, requiring thoughts and actions every day. The state of inclusion practices should always be carefully monitored and actions for improvement are always necessary.

The limits of the study presented in this article are determined, in the first place, by the peculiarities of the institution examined, whose physical environment is naturally conducive to inclusive practices. The majority of vocational agriculture and farming schools in Italy do not have quite the same resources available, therefore they would not be perfectly comparable from this viewpoint. Secondly, the study could have benefitted from classroom observations to analyze more closely the inclusive practices and the relationships among students and teachers. Unfortunately classrooms observations are generally not possible in Italian public schools for privacy reasons.

Future research projects in the same school could investigate more closely the opinions of students, with and without special needs, about the choice of mainstreaming, the benefits and obstacles that it entails, and their lived experience specifically.

More generally speaking, the legislative framework that regulates, in Italy, the integration of pupils with disabilities in mainstream schools is considered very advanced and a model to look at for countries that still use segregated settings for students with special needs. However, the legislative framework designing the choice of mainstreaming seems to be an important ingredient, but not the whole recipe to create inclusive schools.

«Inclusion involves change. It is an unending process of increasing learning and participation for all students. It is an ideal to which schools can aspire but which is never fully reached. But inclusion happens as soon as the process of increasing participation is started. An inclusive school is one that is on the move» (Booth & Ainscow, 2000, p.3).

Inclusive education based on mainstreaming requires continuous effort. While progressive legislation is an essential ingredient, it is never sufficient on its own: rather, it must be followed by the concrete development of inclusive educational practices and strongly supported by a motivating framework for the people involved, teachers in the first place. The *status quo* of school inclusion practices in the Italian education system suggests that, after 40 years of *integrazione scolastica*, important positive results have been reached, but many crucial issues still need to be addressed.

For the future, the Italian model of inclusive education will face many challenges and opportunities, among which building a stronger basis of empirical data to assess the educational outcomes of full mainstreaming and strengthening teachers' training, so as to make teaching in inclusive classes more effective for all learners, as well as for each individual learner.

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