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Teacher attitudes in Italy after 40 years of inclusion

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Teacher attitudes in Italy after 40 years of inclusion

In 1977, Italy adopted a policy to fully include students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. The study surveyed the attitudes of Italian teachers towards inclusive education 40 years after this reform. The data were collected from 153 basic school teachers using the Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusion Scale (TAIS). The results indicated that the Italian teachers had a high commitment to inclusive education. Approximately 90% of the respondents agreed that students with special educational needs should be educated in mainstream classrooms, and only 7% felt that they should be transferred to special education classrooms instead. To improve the quality of inclusive education, the teachers most frequently mentioned the need for more in-service training, smaller class sizes, and additional help from support teachers and therapists in the classroom.

Keywords: teacher attitudes, inclusive education, Italy, disabilities, special education

Introduction

Since the 1970s, Italy has taken a unique approach towards special education for children with intellectual and other disabilities. In the early 1970s, a movement began with the aim to substitute the traditional classroom model, which separated students into special and mainstream classrooms, for a full inclusion model. In 1977, Law 517 ended the traditional model and formed a legal basis for inclusive education (Archivio Pubblica Istruzione, 2014). Follow-up studies reported that approximately 99% of basic school students with special educational needs (SEN) were receiving their education either completely or almost completely in mainstream classrooms 30 years after this reform (Associazione TreeLLe et al, 2011). This number is especially significant because the total number of students identified as having SEN has been reported as approximately 2% of the total student population in Italy for every successive year after the reform. Accordingly, SEN status has only been attributed to students with severe disabilities.

The movement to promote inclusive education in Italy reflects a deep change in cultural values. The 1968 protests known as *movimento del Sessantotto* were the basis for this movement, and they led to the dismantling of the traditional segregated institutions for people with intellectual and mental disabilities (Associazione TreeLLe et al, 2011). Notably, these values continue to be present in Italian society, and the educational system encourages the unique integration of SEN students into mainstream classrooms. The permanence of the inclusive school reform seemingly reflects the success of the measures taken to support inclusive classroom placements; it also reflects permanent teacher support for inclusive policy. That support is the primary object of interest in the present study.

The concept of inclusive education has now lost its precise meaning. Paradoxically, this loss has been a direct consequence of the success it has experienced as a political term. As an umbrella concept, 'inclusive education' has almost supplanted the earlier concept of 'special education'. Along with this development, inclusive education has moved from a measurable outcome to a vaguely defined 'process' (Booth & Ainscow, 2000). In the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations, 2006) the concept remained undefined, even as words such as 'language' and 'communication' were meticulously specified. This intentional ambiguity has made the term useful as a political banner onto which various stakeholders can project their own agendas.

In the present study, the concept of inclusive education retains its original meaning as per its origin, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). According to the Statement, 'inclusive education' refers to the education of all children in mainstream classrooms, provided adequate supports (UNESCO, 1994). In 1994, the concept of inclusion signified a paradigm shift from previous ways of thinking: previously, the 'integration' of students with disabilities was considered in terms of each child's individual-level characteristics, without taking into account how the school environment itself needed to adapt.

Inclusive education in Italian schools has been supported by a twofold strategy. First, additional resources and an upper limit on class size are guaranteed by law. Initially, the number of students in a classroom with a SEN student was limited to 20, but this upper limit has since been raised for economic reasons. A mainstream teacher with at least one SEN student does not work alone in his or her classroom, as a special education teacher, called in Italy 'support teacher' (*insegnante di sostegno*) is assigned to provide specialised assistance. A support teacher has a maximum of four SEN

students under his or her guidance, and mostly oversee only two students (Giangreco et al, 2012). Second, individual education plans are used with SEN students to differentiate their instruction. These plans target two different types of needs. Long-term planning needs are addressed by using a dynamic functional profile (*profilo dinamico funzionale* [PDF]), and short-term planning needs are fulfilled by applying a standard individual education plan (IEP) (Associazione TreeLLe et al, 2011; Canevaro, 2007).

Since the 1970s, inclusive education policies have become more accepted worldwide, epitomised by the Salamanca Statement (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994) and the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). Therefore, the educational reforms in countries such as Italy, which is on the frontline of inclusive education, have become increasingly valuable for international audiences. Unfortunately, because of the language barrier, the efforts to improve inclusive education in Italy have too often remained unknown outside of the country's borders.

The impact of teachers' attitudes on inclusive education measures

It is generally held that the successful instruction of SEN students in general education classrooms is highly dependent on their teachers' positive attitudes (EADSNE, 2012; Unesco, 2009). These attitudes have been thoroughly studied for decades, and most studies conclude that the majority of teachers have a positive view of inclusive education, at least in principle (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996).

Several studies have strongly associated the variability in the attitudes supporting inclusion with the level of inclusion and the severity of the students' disabilities (Forlin et al, 1996; Lifshitz et al, 2004; Moberg, 2003; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Survey

items that presuppose placing additional responsibilities on teachers generally receive the least number of positive responses from teachers (Houck & Rogers, 1994). Teachers typically agree that inclusion creates extra work for them and causes problems in their classrooms (Ahsan et al, 2013; Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Engelbrecht et al, 2013; Forlin et al, 2011; Weiss et al, 2019).

Several previous studies have surveyed the attitudes of Italian teachers towards inclusive education. Twenty years after the 1977 reform, Cornoldi, Terreni, Scruggs and Mastropieri (1998) surveyed 523 general education teachers using an eight-item attitude scale. The results showed that 74% of the teachers were willing to accept a student with learning problems into his or her classroom. Additionally, 76% believed that students with learning problems benefit from being included in a mainstream classroom, and 54% felt that all students benefit. Of the teachers, 22% felt that they had enough training, 19% time, 11% assistance and 8% resources for this purpose. Even though a lack of systemic support was evident in their answers, the Italian teachers were generally willing to include students with learning problems in their classrooms and had a more positive stance towards inclusive education than teachers in any other country (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996).

Another Italian study investigated the opinions of 678 teachers on the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities using a 26-item attitude scale (Balboni & Pedrabissi, 2000). The items were answered with a four-point Likert scale. Special education teachers scored higher (Mean = 82) than classroom teachers (Mean = 71), and both were above the theoretical mean of the scale (Mean = 65). Elementary teachers scored higher than junior or high school teachers. The teachers who had more than 10 years of career experience were more negative towards inclusion than those with less career experience. Notably, the teachers who had no personal experience in the

instruction of students with intellectual disabilities had more positive attitudes than those with this experience. If teachers had this experience, their attitudes became more negative as their careers progressed.

In 2009, 3200 teachers and other Italian school professionals were surveyed on the subject of school integration (Zambotti & Demo, 2011). The teachers were asked about the best educational placement for students with 'particularly complex pathologies'. Only 15% of teachers believed that these students should be placed completely outside of mainstream classrooms, while 65% felt that they should always be placed in mainstream classrooms (Zambotti & Demo, 2011).

In 2010, all Italian teachers entering the profession were surveyed on their attitudes towards students with disabilities (Associazione TreeLLe et al, 2011). The results showed that 88% of general education teachers and 95% of special education teachers saw students with disabilities as enriching the social climate of the classroom. A comparable quota felt that these students allowed for them to further develop their professional knowledge. However, 76% of general education teachers and 64% of special education teachers also agreed that the part-time use of special education environments could achieve better educational results. Even if the question was only about part-time special education measures, the authors interpreted this response as indicative of unresolved problems in inclusion policy implementation (Associazione TreeLLe et al, 2011).

A recent study (Sharma et al, 2018) compared the attitudes of Australian and Italian teachers towards inclusion. The results demonstrated that the Italian teachers were significantly more positive towards inclusion than the Australian teachers. The effect size of the difference, measured by Cohen's d , was as large as $d = 1.3$, indicating that the means of the samples differed from each other by more than one standard

deviation unit. Concerns about inclusion were also measured, and the Australian teachers were found to be more concerned about declining academic standards ($d = 0.47$) and much more concerned about the increase in their own workload ($d = 0.96$) than the Italian teachers.

The present study

Rather than teachers' negative attitudes, the main issues with inclusive education in Italy have been the perceived lack of educational resources and the challenges involving collaboration between teachers in the classroom environment (Associazione TreeLLe et al, 2011; Devecchi et al, 2012). Several recent studies confirm the continually positive attitude of Italian teachers towards inclusion (Associazione TreeLLe et al, 2011; Balboni & Pedrabissi, 2000; Cornoldi, Terreni, Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1998; Sharma et al, 2018; Zambotti & Demo, 2011). The aim of the present study was to survey Italian teachers using a standardized measure of attitudes towards inclusion in order to make accurate cross-national comparisons analogous to the Sharma et al (2018) study, which compared Italy and Australia. By using the TAIS scale (Saloviita, 2015), the responses from the Italian teachers could be compared with previous results obtained from Finland and Germany. In addition, the specific items of the TAIS provide new and more detailed information on teachers' thoughts around inclusive education. Finally, we surveyed teachers' observations of the problems still associated with inclusive education 40 years after the 1977 reform.

Methods

Participants

The participants in the present study were 153 Italian primary school teachers (90% female and 10% male). Their mean age was 49 years ($SD = 7.6$), and their average

career had lasted for 21 years. Of the participants, 123 were classroom teachers and 28 were support teachers.

Data collection

The data were collected using an e-mail survey sent to the participants of four in-service teacher-training courses organised by Tuttoscuola and Fondazione Besso in 2018. The participants in these free web courses on various educational topics were from all parts of Italy, including, for instance, Rome, Napoli, Milano and Torino. The survey was sent to all 300 participants via e-mail, with a return rate of approximately 50%. The cover letter stated that the survey was both voluntary and anonymous. Only those participants who reported that they worked as either a classroom teacher or a support teacher were included in the study.

Survey instrument

A 10-item Teachers' Attitudes towards Inclusion Scale (TAIS) (Saloviita, 2015) measured the teachers' attitudes towards inclusion as defined in the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). The scoring was based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (scored 1) to 'strongly agree' (scored 5), with a neutral midpoint. In six items, the scoring was reversed before the sum total was calculated (see Table 1). In the Finnish samples, the Cronbach's alpha for the reliability of the scale varied from 0.81 to 0.90 (Saloviita, 2015). In the present study, the reliability was lower ($\alpha = 0.75$), albeit acceptable. The scale was one-dimensional in the Finnish samples (Saloviita, 2015; Saloviita & Tolvanen, 2018) but not in the German sample (Saloviita & Schaffus, 2016). In the present sample, two factors emerged from the principal-axis factor analysis. Three items measuring inclusion as a value scored the highest in the first factor, while the outcomes and the rights scored higher in the second factor. These factors were not used in the further analysis of the data because of the small sample size

of the study. The content validity of the scale is manifested by its diverse contents. The scale included items on expected outcomes, rights of the child, teacher workload and inclusion as a value. To determine the divergent validity of the scale, it was compared with other scales measuring self-efficacy towards inclusion (Saloviita, 2015). Its convergent and divergent validity was confirmed using the subscales of the Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education Revised (SACIE-R) scale (Forlin et al, 2011; Saloviita, 2015). The scale was translated from English to Italian by the second author, who is a native speaker of Italian. The translation was compared with the original Finnish text by the first author, who is fluent in Italian. It was ascertained that each item had the same meaning in both languages.

In addition to the TAIS, the questionnaire contained several multiple-choice questions on demographics. To obtain information on the perceived lack of resources and other issues that could possibly affect inclusion policy implementation, the teachers were asked the following question: ‘Which actions would you see as beneficial to improving the quality of inclusive education?’ The response alternatives contained eight closed items and an additional possibility to write one’s own answers.

Data analysis

Data were analysed with SPSS Statistical Package (Version 24). Descriptive statistics, factor analysis, correlations, simple statistical tests and Cohen’s *d* as a measure of effect size were used.

Results

The mean TAIS score of the classroom teachers (Mean = 41.3, SD = 6.5) was much higher than the arithmetic mean of the scale (Mean = 30.0) confirming highly positive attitudes of the sample towards inclusion. The mean TAIS score of the support teachers (Mean = 43.2, SD = 4.7) was slightly higher than that of the classroom teachers

given above, but the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.158$). Age was not associated with TAIS score ($r = 0.04$). The teachers' answers to the individual items demonstrated a strong commitment to the idea of inclusion (see Table 1). Only 5% of the teachers believed that SEN students achieve their best possible results when placed in special classrooms, and 91% believed that they should be educated in mainstream classrooms as much as possible.

When asked about which actions could improve the quality of inclusive education, the teachers most often mentioned the need for more training (69%). They also wished for fewer students in their classrooms (58%) and more help from their support teachers (51%) (Table 2).

Discussion

The results of the present study demonstrate the high commitment of Italian teachers to the principle of inclusive education, a dedication that has been sustained for 40 years and has strengthened rather than weakened. The positive percentages in this study, indicative of positive attitudes towards inclusive education, were even higher than those reported 20 years earlier (Cornoldi et al, 1998). While the low return rate of 50% might harm the integrity of this study, its results fit well with the findings of previous Italian studies. Notably, Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) found that the return rate, at least in observed limits, did not influence the results obtained from surveys given to teachers on classroom inclusion.

By comparing the attitudes of Italian teachers with those of teachers from other countries that have higher rates of school segregation, it becomes clear that the attitudes towards inclusion generally reflect the different special education structures of these teachers' countries. Finland and Germany have higher usage rates of self-contained special education classrooms than most other European countries (EADSNE, 2018).

About 5.4% of all primary school students in Finland and about 4.2% of those in Brandenburg, Germany receive their instruction on a continuous basis in special education classrooms (Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg 2013, 28; Statistics Finland, 2018). When the TAIS was used to measure teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, Finnish classroom teachers scored lower (Mean = 28.0, SD = 8.2) than Italian classroom teachers (Mean = 41.3, SD = 6.5) (Saloviita, 2018), and those from Brandenburg, Germany scored even lower (Mean = 24.1, SD = 6.3) (Saloviita & Schaffus, 2016). An analysis of Cohen's d indicates that there were significant differences in the results of the Italian teachers relative to those of the Finnish teachers ($d = 1.81$) and the German teachers ($d = 2.81$).

Such large differences in the teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education may be attributed to two primary factors. First, the differences in their attitudes may mirror the differences in these countries' cultural values. Second, the differences in their attitudes seem to be associated with the availability of extra support for classrooms that include SEN students. Only 30% of the Italian teachers agreed that inclusion caused extra work for a classroom teacher. In contrast, 56% of Finnish teachers and 90% of German teachers agreed with this statement (Saloviita, 2018; Saloviita & Schaffus, 2016). These percentages correspond with the respective availability of extra support in each country's educational system for SEN students and their classroom teachers. Italian law guarantees that the placement of a SEN student in a mainstream classroom will be coupled with the presence of a support teacher. Finnish teachers often have only a teaching assistant for support. In Brandenburg, only the class size is controlled in these cases (Saloviita & Schaffus, 2016). The availability of extra support when the student with SEN is included in the mainstream classroom probably is not fully detached from the general atmosphere of the country towards persons with disabilities.

It seems that in those countries where inclusion is appreciated, also the supports are more easily available than in other countries.

The teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education, beside general cultural atmosphere, likely also reflect the perceived availability of extra support to alleviate the expected workload increase when a student with SEN is placed in a mainstream classroom. Therefore, legislation that guarantees educational support for teachers with SEN students may be a more efficient way to promote positive attitudes towards inclusion than, for instance, additional in-service training.

When asked about how to improve the quality of inclusive education, the Italian teachers most often mentioned the need for in-service training, which was also the most popular choice in an earlier study (Cornoldi et al, 1998). To promote inclusion, many teachers also wanted to limit their class sizes and receive more help from their support teachers, therapists and psychologists.

The enduring commitment of Italian teachers to inclusive education has resulted in admiration from professionals in other countries. While it is difficult to transfer such core values between established societies, the wealth of Italian experiences in the promotion of inclusive education is notable and may prove influential to the educational systems of other countries. For instance, the systematic co-teaching of mainstream and support teachers seems exemplary. At the same time, this same practice has also proven difficult in Italian schools because it demands proper cooperation between the participants (Associazione TreeLLe et al, 2011; Ianes, 2011).

When comparing the results from Italy, Finland and Germany one can't miss the close association of positive teacher attitudes towards inclusion with the easiness and certainty to get extra help in the classroom when a child with disabilities is included. To guarantee this help seems to be the key issue in inclusive education.

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Table 1: Italian basic school teachers' responses to the TAIS items

Item	N	Mean	SD	Neg. %	Pos. %
Expected outcomes					
1. Children with special educational needs (SEN) learn best in their own special education classes where they have specially trained teachers. (R)*	121	1.25	0.52	79.3	4.1
6. Children with SEN learn best when they are placed in the special education classrooms that best suit them as individuals. (R)	122	1.20	0.57	87.7	8.2
10. Children with SEN can have their learning effectively supported in mainstream classrooms.	123	2.85	0.48	4.9	89.4
Rights of the child					
3. Children with SEN have the right to be placed in special education classrooms. (R)	123	1.30	0.61	78.0	8.1
9. Children with SEN should be transferred to special education classrooms in order not to violate their legal rights. (R)	121	1.27	0.59	80.2	7.4
Workload of the teacher					
5. Teachers' workloads should not be increased by compelling them to accept children with SEN into their classrooms. (R)	123	2.02	0.87	36.6	38.2
8. Integrating children with SEN creates extra work for teachers in mainstream classrooms. (R)	123	1.93	0.82	37.4	30.1
Inclusion as a value					
2. Children with emotional and behavioural problems should be educated in mainstream classrooms, with the provision of adequate support.	123	2.67	0.66	10.6	77.2
4. Children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) should be admitted in mainstream classrooms, with the provision of adequate support.	123	2.80	0.51	4.9	85.4
7. Children with SEN should be educated in mainstream classrooms as much as possible.	121	2.87	0.43	3.3	90.1

*Note: The scoring of items marked with R was reversed when the sum total was counted.

Table 2: Italian basic school teachers' responses to the question 'Which actions would you see as beneficial to improving the quality of inclusive education?'

Action desired	Agree %
1. More training for the teacher	69
2. Fewer students in the classroom	58
3. More help from the support teacher	51
4. More help from the therapist and the psychologist	46
5. More planning time	33
6. More help from the school assistant	17
7. More help from the family	17
8. Transfer the SEN student to another classroom	1