



# THE ITALIAN EXAMPLE

Italy's system of *integrazione scolastica* is evidence that inclusion is no utopian ideal, reports Simona D'Alessio, researcher on inclusive education

Inclusive education means different things to different people. Its definition also changes depending on the country, the social and political conditions and the historical period in which it is considered. From my viewpoint, inclusive education is the educational principle that aims to reform education systems and to create more equal and just societies.

Italy has had to face many challenges linked to inclusive education, not least the struggle against discrimination, and the exclusion that is inherent in 'special education' in segregated settings.

Italy made a truly inclusive choice. In 1971, despite the difficulties of systemic constraints and the lack of research and resources, the country passed anti-discriminatory legislation known as *integrazione scolastica*. This policy paved the way for dismantling special education and encouraging the process of mainstreaming disabled students into regular classrooms.

*Integrazione scolastica* sought to trigger educational change

through actions, rather than words. It outlawed the practice of placing disabled students outside the mainstream, calling this a denial of human rights. In Italy, all students are welcomed in their neighbourhood schools. There is no waiting list for enrolment and all students can register at anytime of the school year, without going through screening measures, and without any risk of being rejected.

It is thanks to this 'inclusive' policy that Marco Borzetti, 17, is now attending his local upper secondary school. When he was born he was diagnosed with Down's Syndrome, and given a medical label that did not say anything about his love of cycling and computers and his yearning to learn along with his peers. Luckily enough however, the process of "statementing" in Italy, known as 'certificazione di handicap' (Law 104/1992), does not lead to segregation through separate educational settings. If Marco had been born in another country, he may not have studied with children from his district and he may not have gone cycling



Photo: UNESCO Paris

in the local area with his school friends. Despite the bias that his parents still face at school level, Marco takes part in all school activities and is provided with additional personnel (a support teacher and a learning support assistant) and material resources (IT tools and specialised aids) to help him study.

Such extra support is possible because under the terms of the *integrazione scolastica*, each "statemented" student receives an individual educational plan (IEP). This contains a description of their potential and difficulties, and a guide containing recommendations for the school and class teachers about removing other barriers in the school that may hinder participation in learning. The IEP is not only a key

tool for implementing *integrazione scolastica*, it is also an important document for Marco and his family, showing Marco's progression in learning.

Italy's policy of *integrazione scolastica* appears to provide strong evidence to counter arguments that inclusion is a utopian project, ideologically driven but not feasible on a practical level. The success of "statemented" students under the policy of *integrazione scolastica* shows how a sense of belonging is an essential pre-requisite for learning to take place. Marco once told me that he wanted to be with his classmates where he belonged. Could *integrazione scolastica* in Italy's schools set the example of inclusion throughout society as a whole?

