Comparing Inclusive Education

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Teachers' Struggles in Italy and China

By

Lishuai Jia and Marina Santi

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
BES	Bisogni Educativi Speciali
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DSA	Disturbi Specifici di Apprendimento
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder
ICF	International Classification of Functioning
ICIDH	International Classification of Impairments, Disability and Handicaps
INVALSI	Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione
LRC	Learning in Regular Classrooms
SEN	Special Educational Needs
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WHO	World Health Organization

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Comparing Inclusive Education in Italy and China: New connections on the Silk Road

On June 7, 1994, the city of Salamanca, in Spain, hosted a groundbreaking world conference on Special Needs Education, backed by UNESCO and the local government. This event marked a pivotal moment in the history of human rights, championing the revolutionary principle of *Education for All* (UN, 1990). The outcome, known as the "*Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*" quickly became a milestone in the development of an alternative paradigm on human disability and health. For the first time, inclusive education was proposed as a significant, indispensable, and universal pedagogical value, aimed at benefiting societies globally.

> Human differences are normal, and that learning must accordingly be adapted to the needs of the child rather than the child fitted to preordained assumptions regarding the pace and nature of the learning process. A child-centred pedagogy is beneficial to all students and, as a consequence, to society as a whole. (UNESCO, 1994, 16)

The power of inclusion, as an educational, social, and economic transformative policy revolution, was first championed globally through international efforts (UNESCO, 1994). Since the Salamanca Statement, inclusive education has become a global agenda, gaining more attention than any other educational initiatives. However, the path carved by the Salamanca Statement is part of a broader map with many intersecting routes from different times and places. Efforts to provide education for all existed long before the Salamanca Statement, dating back to the creation of UNESCO in 1946. Post-Salamanca, the commitment to inclusive education has continued, driven by diverse assumptions, priorities, and aspirations. In this section, aware of the vast scope of the topic, we offer a brief overview of the long-standing tradition of education for all. This is presented from a

human rights perspective, under international actions, both before and after the Salamanca Statement.

One of the most prominent advocates for human rights, Katarina Tomasevski, posited that the significance of education as a fundamental human right is unparalleled and transcends all others. In other words, the attainment of other rights, including economic, social, and cultural rights, is made possible through the instrument of education (Acedo, 2008; Torres, 2008). It thus follows that the guarantee of the human right to education represents a global agenda supported by a multitude of international organisations. It is evident that the international community has placed significant emphasis on the protection and promotion of the right to education through the enactment of legislation, the establishment of regulations, the convening of conferences, and other means. The foundation of UNESCO in 1946 saw the adoption of a Constitution that included a preamble which stated: "The States Parties to this Constitution, committed to providing full and equal opportunities for education for all, undertook the obligation to promote the human right to education" (UNESCO, 1946, Preamble). This initial action, seen as the first international initiative devoted to this cause, laid the foundation for future developments in the promotion of human education rights (Mundy, 2016).

A review of the integration process and the international community's efforts to promote inclusive education reveals that the history of inclusion as a global aim and hallmark of increasing civilization is relatively recent. It emerged in the early 1990s (Stainback & Stainback, 1992) and was first articulated in the Salamanca Statement in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994). Since the 1990s, it has been a prominent feature of the global agenda in special education (Piji, Meijer & Hegarty, 1997; Vislie, 2003). The advent of inclusion was driven by growing dissatisfaction with the integration approach and its practices, which aimed to educate all children in mainstream schools.

Farrell (2000) describes the practice in the United Kingdom of placing children with disabilities, where some were segregated in special schools, while others were integrated into mainstream schools. However, there was minimal or no consideration of the quality of integrated provision in mainstream schools. According to Farrell, the goal of inclusion was to provide appropriate education for students with disabilities in mainstream schools. The emergence of the concept of inclusion, closely associated with integration, has led researchers to question whether this new terminology represents merely a linguistic shift or a new agenda (Vislie, 2003).

Responses to this can be easily found in numerous literatures. Some researchers argue that several issues under the umbrella of inclusion are not novel and can be subsumed into integration (Piji et al., 1997). Conversely,

other scholars contend that these issues, although partially overlapping, are different and that it is necessary to make a clear distinction between them (Ainscow et al., 2006). The introduction of the term "inclusion" represents a significant shift in terminology, signifying not merely a linguistic change but a fundamental move in the underlying agenda. Compared to the terminology of integration, "inclusion" introduces a more expansive vision, encompassing additional agendas not reflected in the meanings associated with integration (Vislie, 2003). Consequently, another intractable question arises: what is the meaning of inclusion?

In attempting to ascertain the meaning of "inclusion", it is important to note that, despite extensive discussions on the topic since 1994, there remains no consensus on its precise interpretation. Efforts to provide an explicit definition have proven elusive, and a common understanding of inclusion continues to be debated (Ainscow et al., 2000; Booth, 1996; Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Dyson & Millward, 2000; Florian, 2014; Goransson & Nilholm, 2014; Hegarty, 2001; McLeskey et al., 2014; Reindal, 2016).

The definition of inclusion is open to interpretation, as it depends on the theoretical framework used. Some scholars, like Dyson (1999), prefer the term "inclusions" over "inclusion". Additionally, researchers have suggested various definitions. For instance, Ainscow (2005) shared his experience with a local education authority's effort to develop a more inclusive policy. He proposed that those examining their working definition of inclusion should consider four key elements: (a) Inclusion is an ongoing process; (b) Inclusion involves identifying and removing barriers; (c) Inclusion ensures that all students participate and achieve their own success; and (d) Inclusion emphasises certain types of students who are vulnerable to marginalisation, exclusion, or underachievement (Ainscow, 2005). Thus, what emerges is more a crossroads of meanings than a definition aimed at enucleating an unambiguous concept. When coniugated with the term "education" the ambiguities even increase. Researchers from various disciplinary backgrounds and diverse contexts have endeavoured to offer nuanced interpretations of inclusive education. Consequently, the existing studies on this topic not only establish a robust foundation for future research but also provide a framework for re-evaluating our own work. Furthermore, a lack of comprehensive understanding of current research on inclusive education hinders the development of a more nuanced understanding within our own studies.

In light of the aforementioned considerations, we will begin by introducing the concept of inclusive education and examining it from a comprehensive perspective. Then, we will elucidate the specific interpretations of inclusive education that emerge from existing literature.

Finally, we will analyse the various perspectives on inclusive education to clarify the core values of inclusion and justify the methodological choices employed in the subsequent research.

It is clearly not the aim of this introduction to present a complete and exhaustive review on the subject, but simply to place our study in the context of theoretical, political, and pragmatic references. From an international standpoint, numerous organisations have dedicated their resources to advancing and advocating for inclusive education. However, there remains a lack of consensus regarding its precise definition and scope. Different communities interpret the terminology in various ways, reflecting contrasting theoretical and ideological, social, and cultural contexts (D'Alessio & Watkins, 2009). Nonetheless, common concerns have emerged from the various studies conducted. Despite the varying definitions and interpretations of inclusive education at the international level, certain themes persist. As D'Alessio (2011) concludes, two principal concerns emerge from cultural studies by various international communities regarding inclusive education. Firstly, in some countries, inclusive education focuses on eliminating segregated educational settings and educating all children in mainstream schools, regardless of whether they have special educational needs (SEN). Secondly, in other countries, inclusive education emphasises increasing the number of students accessing basic education (UNESCO, 2009). D'Alessio (2011) further identifies two distinct approaches to interpreting inclusive education, particularly within the European context. The first approach emphasises providing specialised support for pupils identified as having SEN, regardless of their placement in mainstream or special schools. This approach focuses on the responsiveness of educational arrangements to students' additional needs (Meijer, Soriano & Watkins, 2003a, 2003b). The second approach aligns with the Education for All agenda, emphasising the fundamental right to education for all children (UNESCO, 1990, 2000, 2003).

Other researchers (Forlin et al., 2013) have proposed that the definition of inclusive education can be qualified according to two distinct approaches. The first is a top-down approach, which begins with the identification of the core features of inclusive education and then draws a definition from them (Berlach & Chambers, 2011). The second is a bottom-up approach, which defines inclusive education as the elimination of all factors that exclude or hinder children from accessing education (Slee, 2011). In a recent study, Goransson and Nilholm (2014) conducted a critical analysis of existing research on inclusive education. The documented literature on the definition of inclusive education can be grouped into four categories. The first category, the placement definition, considers inclusive education to be the

placement of students with disabilities in regular classrooms. The second category, the specified individualised definition, considers inclusive education to be catering to students' social or academic needs, exclusively those of students with disabilities. The third category, the general individualised definition, considers inclusive education to be catering to all students' social or academic needs. The fourth category, the community definition, considers inclusive education to be the creation of communities with specific characteristics (Goransson & Nilholm, 2014).

In all the above cases, the authors argue that the definition of inclusive education needs to be explicitly defined in both reviews and empirical research, and that new ways of considering the concept are needed. Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006), drawing from their research experience, provide a typology to consider inclusion, which includes six dimensions. According to them, inclusion can be considered as: "(a) concerning children categorised as having SEN; (b) responding to exclusion due to disciplinary problems; (c) relating to all students vulnerable to exclusion; (d) facilitating schools for all children; (e) aligning with the *Education for All* agenda; (f) promoting an approach to education and society" (Ainscow et al., 2006, p.15).

Conversely, most researchers endeavour to provide a concrete explanation of inclusive education from specific perspectives. From the standpoint of educational quality, inclusive education is understood as a process that ensures appropriate educational opportunities for all students, rather than merely focusing on the placement of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools. This perspective represents a significant advancement compared to integration, which primarily involves the logistics and compatibility of coexistence of different needs in the classrooms. As O'Brien (2001, p. 48) asserts, the concept of inclusive education in schools extends beyond mere "inclusive placement" to encompass the crucial aspect of "inclusive learning". This shift is based on the assumption that inclusive education can identify and address each student's unique learning needs and preferences. In essence, inclusive education is viewed as a means of enhancing the quality of regular education, rather than being solely focused on special education (Hassanein, 2015).

Corbett and Slee (1999) posited that inclusive education, from a human rights perspective, can be seen as a result of significant political movements, such as the disability rights movement, which have gained traction in certain countries. They argued that inclusion involves providing educational access to all individuals without exception and should not be contingent on any form of partial inclusion.

Anyway, the development of inclusive education practice in different parts of the world is giving rise to a shift in perspective regarding the interpretation of inclusion among researchers (Cigman, 2007; Dyson & Millward, 2000; Rouse & Florian, 1996). The tradition of considering inclusive education as a new pedagogical and political challenge dates back to the late 1980s, when researchers proposed a new conceptualization of inclusion. They argued that achieving inclusivity required a shift from traditional special education approaches to an alternative perspective focused on developing "effective schools for all" within educational systems (Ainscow, 1991a, 1991b; Ballard, 1997; Booth, 1995; Slee, 1996). The Salamanca Statement, evoked to mark the beginning of the inclusion era, aligns with this tradition, advocating for radical changes in organisational and educational system structures to benefit all students (Ainscow, Dyson & Weiner, 2013). In this context, inclusive education is regarded as "the educational principle that aims at changing existing education systems and creating a more equal and just society" (D'Alessio, 2012, p. 27). This approach focuses on all members of society and suggests methods for transforming educational and social systems. From this perspective, inclusive education "is not about closing down an unacceptable system of segregated provision and dumping those pupils in an unchanged mainstream system," but rather about changing pre-existing school systems in terms of teaching methods, curriculum content, architectural factors, management styles, and more (Barton, 1998, p. 84; Mittler, 2000). Moreover, the epistemological implications of the change in terminology are clear, suggesting the need for a real paradigm shift and a different perspective in identifying and approaching the issue of difference (Santi, 2014). In this sense, the quest for inclusion represents a core request for many scholars committed to addressing the missing dimensions of well-being and "well-becoming" in education systems, for all and at all levels (Biggeri & Santi, 2012). The subjective right to live a good life is rooted in fostering people's capabilities and aspirations through education, inspired by values such as freedom and equity. Equity intersects with inclusion as a systemic response and conversion factor for individuals and communities' life designs, bolstered by the flexibility and plasticity of educational actions. Disability becomes the true measure of a social system's justice, with impairment serving as the gauge of equity. This is evident in the ability of individuals and communities to make choices and take initiatives within their contexts, rather than merely in the quantity of undifferentiated services provided to meet standardised needs (Santi, 2013, 2019).

Another perspective on inclusive education is that of increasing participation and decreasing exclusion, embracing participation in society

more broadly. In this respect, inclusive education can be regarded as a means of promoting the participation of all citizens in all aspects of social life. This is clearly a concept that extends well beyond the traditional scope of education, which is commonly understood to encompass instruction. The following elucidates this point. Firstly, the principle of inclusive education can be defined as a process of increasing students' participation in and decreasing any forms of exclusion from mainstream education (Booth, 1996; Booth et al., 1998). The primary objective of inclusive education is to provide general education for all and to make every effort to increase participation. As inclusive education has developed, a broader understanding known as social inclusion has emerged. Consequently, the concept of inclusion now encompasses not only the education of students with SEN but also the encouragement of all citizens to participate in all social activities, with respect and value accorded to each individual's participation in social life. All societal institutions, including educational establishments, communities, and governments, must eliminate obstacles and expand opportunities for all individuals to engage in everyday social activities (Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Hassanein, 2015).

Inclusive education is a culture that celebrates and values individual differences (Barton, 1998; Corbett, 2001). It is therefore incumbent upon the educational system to respect the dignity of every student, regardless of whether they have disabilities or not. Rather than reinforcing pre-existing inequalities (Barton, 1998), the system should facilitate the achievement of this goal. Moreover, as D'Alessio (2012) posits, in order to genuinely attain the objective of valuating students' diversity and individual distinction, it is imperative to discern and transform these distinctive "educational resources". In order to achieve this, a fundamental shift is required from a process of mere acceptance and tolerance to a process of genuine celebration of difference. This shift must go beyond both the logic of "compensation/exemption" and the "dilemma of difference" (Terzi, 2005). The question thus arises as to how this shift can be accomplished. This necessitates a re-evaluation of the existing educational system to ensure that it can accommodate the diverse needs of students, including modifications to teaching methods, curriculum content, and assessment processes. The comprehensive inclusive process in the Italian school, which has been a pioneer in this field since the 1970s, provides an illustrative example of this aspiration. It has undoubtedly encompassed the multifaceted complexities of equity, engaging legislators and educational professionals in the pursuit of an "inclusive school and a fairer world" (Canevaro, 2013). For the Italian pedagogist Canevaro, the progressive "dehumanisation" that occurs through the homologation of diversity is a key factor in the

production of educational injustice. This issue arises from the standardisation of differences, a characteristic of the logic of domination and colonisation of human functioning. Beyond focusing on specific aspects of inclusive education, some studies strive to provide a comprehensive understanding, reflecting the key elements of inclusion highlighted in the definitions above. In this regard, certain international documents and researchers' insights can serve as exemplary references.

As we mentioned above, in 1994 the Salamanca Statement provides a definition regarding inclusive education, which states:

> The fundamental principle of inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they might have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organisational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of supports and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school (UNESCO, 1994, 11–12).

In accordance with the Salamanca Statement, inclusive education can be defined as follows: (a) the provision of education for all students in a single setting; (b) the responsiveness to the diverse needs of students; (c) the guarantee of quality education for all students; (d) the accommodation of students' needs through the modification of the existing educational system; and (e) an ongoing process, with a continuum of provision for students with SEN.

Considering the global proliferation of inclusive education practices, UNESCO (2009) offers a definition of inclusive education that encompasses a multitude of facets of inclusion. Its understanding is as follows:

> Inclusive education is a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach out to all learners (...). As an overall principle, it should guide all education policies and practices, starting from the fact that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just and equal society. Inclusion can be seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth, and adults by increasing their participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures, and strategies, with a common vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular educational system to educate all children (UNESCO, 2009, 8).

Based on UNESCO's (2009) understanding, inclusive education can be summarised as: (a) a process; (b) ensuring the educational system to reach out to all students; (c) a fundamental human right; (e) paving the way for a more fair and equitable society; (f) responding to learners' diversity educational needs; (g) increasing participation and eliminating exclusion and (h) changing pre-existing educational system.

Some researchers, based on inclusive practice, also offer a comprehensive understanding of inclusion. For example, Booth and Ainscow (2002) in the *Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning and Participation in Schools* argue that inclusion in education involves: "a) valuing all students and staff equally; b) increasing the participation of students in, and reducing their exclusion from, the cultures, curricula, and communities of local schools; c) restructuring the cultures, policies, and practices in schools so that they respond to the diversity of students in the locality; d) reducing barriers to learning and participation for all students, not only those with impairments or those who are categorised as 'having SEN'; e) learning from attempts to overcome barriers to the access and participation of particular students to make changes for the benefit of students more widely; f) viewing the difference between students as resources to support learning, rather than problems to be overcome; g) acknowledging the right of students to an education in their locality; h) improving schools for staff as well as for students; i) emphasising the role of schools in building community and developing values, as well as in increasing achievement; j) fostering mutually sustaining relationships between schools and communities; k) recognizing that inclusion in education is one aspect of inclusion in society" (Booth & Ainscow, 2002, p.3).

In conclusion, the aforementioned definitions illustrate that the term "inclusive education" remains a subject of debate, and its interpretation continues to evolve. Given that researchers come from diverse cultural backgrounds and embrace varying inclusive practices, it is unsurprising that the concept of inclusive education is understood differently across contexts. As Ainscow (2008) posits, the multitude of explanations can be attributed to the fact that "inclusion" is interpreted in numerous ways, largely depending on the social and cultural context in which it is examined. The existence of diverse, plausible, and insightful interpretations regarding inclusive education is not only acceptable but also enriches our understanding of the concept.

In light of the considerations, the present book is developed around a comparative analysis of inclusive education in Italy and China. This analysis is based on the direct experiences of teachers in both countries, without any preliminary definition being agreed upon. The data collected in

Italian and Chinese school contexts between 2016 and 2020 is used as a basis for this book, which has three main aims. The first is to understand the historical policy evolution of inclusive education in Italy and China, taking into account the different meanings it has in the respective cultures. The second is to explore teachers' understanding of inclusive education in Italian and Chinese school contexts. The third is to enrich our knowledge of how to make education more inclusive from cross-cultural perspectives. In alignment with the objectives of this study, three research questions have been formulated for investigation. The first research question regards how the policy of inclusive education has evolved in Italy and China over the past five decades. Secondly, this study seeks to ascertain how a limited sample of educators in Italy and China comprehend the concept of inclusive education. Thirdly, it aims to identify insights that can inform the future evolution of inclusive education, based on an analysis of policies and practices in Italy and China. The issues raised were linked to the different levels of the study conducted to provide a cultural frame for the research, an explorative path of the inquiry and an empirical usefulness of the investigation. In order to achieve the aims and answer the posed questions, a qualitative research design has been adopted and developed to guide the study. The *Understanding by Design* model, as proposed by Wiggins and McTighe (2005), has been employed as a framework to facilitate the present investigation into teachers' understanding of inclusive education in Italy and China. This is particularly in regard to the six aspects that have been identified as being conducive to accessing a multifaceted comprehension of complex phenomena.

The contribution of this book to the existing body of research on inclusive education can be distilled into three key points. Firstly, it enriches our understanding of inclusive education by exploring its interpretations in privileged contexts, such as the meanings and experiences of schools and teachers. Furthermore, it compares different cultures, not to highlight diversities, but to enlarge the dominant perspective. As Lindsay (2003) observed, the lack of an internationally accepted, unambiguous definition of inclusive education presents a significant challenge to researchers. However, we view this as an opportunity to consider the nuances and complexities of this concept. A substantial body of research has been conducted with the aim of defining and understanding the concept of inclusive education. However, despite this, there remains a lack of consensus on a clear and universally accepted definition of this term. Consequently, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) asserted that further research is required to provide a more precise definition of inclusive education. According to these considerations, and in recognition of the inherent

difficulties in defining this complex and multifaceted issue, the present exploratory study can be viewed as a response to the concerns raised by researchers in this field. Secondly, this study presents a unique comparative analysis of inclusive education in Italy and China, enriching the international discourse on the topic. Recognizing the pivotal role that teachers play in promoting and spreading an inclusive culture within schools (Charema, 2010; Saroviita, 2020), this study expands the scope of international comparative literature on teachers' views (concepts, attitudes, beliefs) regarding inclusive education (Fiorucci, 2016; Charitaki et al., 2022; Dygnat et al., 2022; Swab et al., 2023). The objective of the present study is to gain a deeper understanding of inclusive education in two distinct cultural contexts: Italian and Chinese. This research is particularly significant as it builds upon existing studies on Italian inclusive education, which have been conducted by researchers worldwide (see, for example, the Special Issue 8(2) 2014 of the *Alter Journal*, which was dedicated to this topic). Additionally, it contributes to the existing body of literature comparing Italy with other countries. However, studies comparing Italy and China remain scarce. In light of this research gap, the present exploratory study seeks to bridge the gap between the inclusive education policies and practices of Italy and China. This endeavour will facilitate enhanced communication and exchange between the two countries, enabling mutual learning in the domain of inclusive education development. Furthermore, it will contribute to the consolidation of cross-cultural communication between Western and Eastern traditions, to the matter in which Italy and China represent the distinct cultural traditions of the Western and Eastern worlds, respectively. Consequently, this exploratory study presents a valuable opportunity to enlarge the dialogue between Western and Eastern cultures, with the aim of fostering greater openness and inclusivity in both.

The following four chapters provide a detailed examination of the conceptualisation of inclusive education in government policy documents and school practices in Italy and China. They also identify areas of mutual learning and benefits that can be derived from a cross-cultural comparative exploratory study.

Chapter two provides an overview of the Italian and Chinese contextual background for the current exploratory study, and it examines the historical development of the inclusive education policy in the two countries. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of inclusive education, a number of related issues are explored. In Italy, the focus is on the relationship between *integrazione scolastica* (school integration) and inclusion. In China, the discussion turns to issues such as the meaning of "Learning in Regular Classrooms" (LRC), the LRC as a sub-theme of

special education, and the challenges for the implementation of LRC.

In chapters 3 and 4, we present empirical research findings from the Italian and Chinese school contexts. The data collected in this study came from interviews involving two samples of teachers and were based on the six aspects detailed by Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) in their *Understanding by Design theory*, that are*: explanation, application, self-knowledge, empathy, perspective,* and *interpretation*. These aspects guided both the structure of the interviews and the discourse qualitative analysis which stay at the basis of the comparative discussion. This study aspires to offer a comprehensive account of how inclusive education is conceptualised by Italian and Chinese school teachers; details on the methodology employed, are shortly reported in the Appendix. To gain a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions of inclusive education, these two chapters are structured into six sections, corresponding to the six aforementioned aspects.

Chapter five primarily revisits the concept of inclusive education, offering insights into the potential for enhancing its inclusivity from a "soft" comparative standpoint between Italy and China. This study is particularly interested in exploring the unique differences, histories and practices of the two countries in terms of inclusive education policy and school practice. In doing so, we pose questions and identify issues that emerge from these two contexts. This final chapter, therefore, does not adhere strictly to the principles of comparative analysis, as there is no attempt to treat the data from two distinct contexts as comparable. However, it is hoped that the various questions and issues that emerge from considering these two disparate contexts, namely Italy and China, will prove illuminating and contribute to a deeper understanding of how to make education more inclusive on a global scale and as a fundamental objective for humanity as a whole.

The concluding chapter offers an overview of the present exploratory study and suggests avenues for future research on inclusive education from a transcultural perspective and aspiration.

CHAPTER TWO

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY: CONTEXTS IN ITALY AND CHINA

The objective of this chapter is to establish the context for a cross-cultural exploratory study on inclusive education from teachers' perspectives, focusing on their understanding of the construct both as a social phenomenon and a professional commitment. It provides an overview of the policy and practical aspects of inclusive education in Italy and China, contextualising these issues within the broader framework of the book.

Inclusive Education in Italy

Overview and Background of Education in Italy

The aim of this section is to provide an overview of the Italian educational system. Topics to be examined include the structure and organisation of the system, the administrative and governance framework at the central and regional levels, the main features of the national curriculum, assessment procedures, school autonomy, and other pertinent aspects. This will offer a contextual background for the current study.

In accordance with the Italian Constitution, proclaimed on December 22, 1947, education is accessible to all, and compulsory education is free (Art. 34). At the time of the research, the compulsory education period lasts 10 years, commencing at the age of 6 and concluding at the age of 16. Education is accessible at all levels throughout the national territory, and the official language of instruction is Italian.

Briefly, the Italian education system is organised as follows (INDIRE, 2014, p.7):

- Pre-school/Kindergarten Education (Scuola dell'Infanzia) for children between the ages of 3 and 6;
- Primary School (Scuola Primaria) lasts for five years, for children from 6 to 11 years of age;

- Lower Secondary School (Scuola Secondaria di I grado), lasts three years, from ages 11 to 14;
- Upper Secondary School (Scuola Secondaria di II grado), lasts five years, from ages 14 to 19;
- Higher Education is provided by Universities, Institutes of the Higher Education in Art and Music System (Alta Formazione Artistica e Musicale, AFAM) and Higher Technical Institutes (Istituti Tecnici Superiori, ITS).

The period of compulsory education lasts for ten years for children between the ages of 6 and 16. This encompasses the entirety of primary school and lower secondary education, in addition to the initial two years of upper secondary education. With regard to the final two years of compulsory education, which correspond to the first two years of upper secondary education (for students aged 14 to 16), students may attend either a state-run upper secondary school (*Liceo*, Technical Institute or Professional Institute) or a three- or four-year vocation education course within the jurisdiction of the Regions (INDIRE, 2014, p.7). Furthermore, parents or guardians bear the responsibility of ensuring that their children complete the requisite period of compulsory education. Furthermore, local authorities and school directors bear joint responsibility for ensuring that school-aged children complete their compulsory education in their respective jurisdictions. With regard to higher education, admission is contingent upon the successful completion of the state examination, which is conducted at the conclusion of the upper secondary school curriculum. In addition to state-run education, private education is also a prominent feature of the educational landscape. Private education is typically provided by organisations and private individuals who are entitled to establish schools and colleges at no cost to the state (INDIRE, 2014, p. 8).

Regarding the administration and governance of education at the central level, the Ministry of Instruction (MI, *Ministero dell'Istruzione*, starting from 2022 MIM, *Ministero dell'Istruzione e del Merito*) and the Minister of University and Research (MUR, *Ministero dell'Università e della Ricerca*) are primarily responsible for the management of national education. At the local level, the administrative structure comprises provinces and municipalities (*Comuni*). The primary responsibility of provinces is the administration of upper secondary schools, whereas municipalities are primarily responsible for the management of infant, primary, and lower secondary schools. Concurrently, the dedicated educational offices (*Assessorati*) of the provinces and municipalities collectively oversee the implementation of specialised education-related functions (INDIRE, 2014, p. 11).

Following this overview of the general system organisation of Italian education, the remainder of the section will concentrate on the national curriculum and assessments. About the national curriculum, the most significant reform can be attributed to the Autonomy Law (Legge Delega n. 59/1997), which was issued through Presidential Decree n. 275 in 1999. This reform is regarded as a pivotal educational reform that has had a profound impact on the Italian educational system. The primary feature of this reform is the decentralisation of state power to local authorities. Subsequently, the national guidelines (i.e. "Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola dell'infanzia e del primo ciclo d'istruzione", and "Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo della scuola secondaria di primo grado", 2012) commenced the replacement of the former compulsory national curriculum (national programmes). This resulted in the transfer of autonomous power to schools in matters of management and pedagogy, thereby introducing the principle of didactic and organisational flexibility. In practical terms, the curriculum can be developed by local schools to a maximum of 20%. Nevertheless, despite the autonomy afforded to schools, they are still obliged to adhere to a set of objectives outlined in the national curriculum standards, which mandate addressing "core" subjects. These requirements are designed to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills for success in upper secondary education. The educational objectives for both curricular content and competencies remain predominantly regulated at the national level and are largely aligned with established standards. Although schools have methodological, organisational, and experimental autonomy guaranteed by law, national guidelines are still perceived by teachers as stringent constraints on curricular activities. This perception results in teaching being strongly oriented towards predefined programs aimed at academic success in terms of passing final examinations, rather than focusing on the educational success of the students.

With regard to student assessment, Italy has established the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education, Training and Teaching, which is known as INVALSI (*Istituto Nazionale per la Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di Istruzione e di Formazione*). The INVALSI's objective is to evaluate the national school education system through the administration of nationally standardised tests, and it commenced its activities in the 2009/2010 academic year.

These very summarised elements of the Italian instructional system were introduced as an overview to provide a context that facilitates the situating and understanding of inclusive education practice in Italian schools.

The Historical Legislative Path Towards Inclusive Education

From a global perspective, Italy is one of the earliest countries to enact legislation aimed at developing inclusive education, with the first such laws dating back to the late 1960s. Subsequently, Italy has introduced a series of legislative measures to facilitate the advancement of inclusive education. This has resulted in the highest proportion of students with SEN being educated in mainstream schools (Ianes, Demo & Zambotti, 2014; Santi, 2014). Italy is regarded as a pioneer and exemplar in the field of inclusive education, with its progress serving as a source of inspiration and guidance for other countries (Dovigo, 2017, p. 42; Kanter, Damiani & Ferri, 2014). Nevertheless, Italy's advancements in this domain are contingent upon the pioneering political and legislative efforts undertaken over the past four decades in educational reform.

Education as a fundamental right for everyone

The roots of inclusive education can be traced back to the *Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana*, which can be regarded as the first Italian law to declare the intention to build a more equitable and just society (D'Alessio, 2011). The principles and spirit of the Italian Constitution were similar to the more recent European aspiration towards *Education for All*. Both documents assert that education is a fundamental right for everybody and that schools should be open to all students. No individual or group should be excluded on the basis of race, socio-economic status, ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, or physical or intellectual capacity (Acedo, 2008). Consequently, the Italian Constitution has laid a comprehensive framework, enabling the implementation of inclusive education throughout Italian society since the mid-twentieth century.

In terms of the context of the Italian Constitution, it is notable that it begins with the fundamental right of social dignity and equality, which belongs to all citizens, as explicitly expressed in Article 3.

> All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic or social nature which constrain the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic, and social organisation of the country.

Arts. 33 and 34 clearly articulate the general principles for education, including open access to schools, compulsory instruction, and more. They state:

> The Republic lays down general rules for education and establishes state schools of all branches and grades (art.33).
> Schools are open to everyone.
> Primary education, given for at least eight years, is compulsory and free of tuition.
> Capable and deserving pupils, including those lacking financial resources, have the right to attain the highest levels of education.
> The Republic renders this right effective through scholarships, allowances to families and other benefits, which shall be assigned through competitive examinations (art.34).

Specially, the Italian Constitution has also made some rules for students who are "disabled and handicapped"; the government ensures their right to education:

> Disabled and handicapped persons are entitled to receive education and vocational training. Responsibilities under this article are entrusted to entities and institutions established by or supported by the State. (art.38).

A content analysis of the Italian Constitution reveals that its primary objective was to eliminate discrimination and achieve equality, focusing on inclusion rather than exclusion. This legislation was enacted after World War II, following the end of the Fascist regime. Given that the Fascist dictatorship had denied individual freedom, one of the key goals of the democratic Constitution was to prioritise the dignity of the individual and the rights of minorities (D'Alessio, 2011). From that point onwards, the Italian Constitution not only achieved this objective but also fostered an inclusive culture throughout the country, profoundly impacting the growth of inclusive education in Italy.

Making inclusive education as an agenda

Italy has the highest proportion of students with (SEN) in mainstream school classes and the lowest number of special classes and schools of any country in the world (Giangreco & Doyle, 2012). The change occurred within a relatively short time frame, which has been termed "wild integration" (*integrazione selvaggia*) and spanned the years 1971 to 1977 (Ferri, 2008; Kanter, Damiani & Ferri, 2014).

In 1971, Law No. 188/1971 was promulgated, marking the first instance of the integration of disabled students into mainstream educational institutions, with the exception of those with the most severe conditions (Camerini, 2011; D'Alessio, 2011). In terms of the content of Art. 28, a clear challenge is presented: it advocates for students with disabilities to attend mainstream schools and receive an education alongside their peers. Measures were introduced to facilitate the attendance of students with disabilities, including the removal of barriers to school attendance and the provision of free transportation for certain students. Law No. 188/1971 established a robust framework for school integration, even though the term *integrazione* is not explicitly referenced. Despite Law No. 118/1971 being an important legislative measure initiating the process of mainstreaming (De Anna, 1997), it did not call for the closure of special schools. Instead, this legislation provides a foundation for the expansion of special education (D'Alessio, 2011), as evidenced by international literature and observed in other countries.

> Compulsory education must take place in regular schools, in public schools except in those cases in which the subject suffers from severe intellectual deficiency or from physical handicaps so great as to impede or render very difficult the learning processes in the regular classroom. (Booth, 1982, 15)

It is imperative that individuals with disabilities receive their compulsory education in mainstream schools, unless they present significant cultural and pedagogical challenges that cannot be adequately addressed within the mainstream educational system. In such cases, the integration process may be hindered by the need for time and profound changes. D'Alessio (2011) posits that Law No. 118/1971 aims to "facilitate" integration rather than mandate it as a compulsory measure. From this perspective, the legislation reinforces the continued existence of special schools while providing a rationale for regular schools to justify their reluctance to accept and integrate disabled students due to severe physical or intellectual impairments. Furthermore, Law No. 118/1971 allowed individuals with disabilities and physical impairments to receive an education alongside their non-disabled peers. This legislation is seen as a "functionalist" approach to disability (Armstrong, 2007), as it addresses disability from the standpoint of providing special services rather than considering it from a pedagogical or organisational perspective. This approach, viewed through a welfare lens, focuses on assistance for impairment rather than education. The use of terms like "invalid" suggests that an individual's impairment is the primary cause of their disability, implying a causal and linear relationship between the two.

It is crucial to acknowledge that merely placing students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms is insufficient. To ensure their success, it is essential to provide them with the adequate pedagogical frameworks and didactic instructions, which necessitates the utilisation and operationalisation of educational research. With this awareness, in 1975, to gain a deeper insight into the most effective methods for integrating students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, the Italian Senator Franca Falcucci coordinated a comprehensive research project across the country. The final report, entitled "*Relazione conclusiva della Commissione Falcucci concernente i problemi scolastici degli alunni handicappati*", constituted a pivotal moment in the history of educational research. It marked the first instance in which a pedagogical approach was employed to investigate the principles of integration in education, and also the inaugural occasion on which the term "*integrazione scolastica*" was officially utilised. As stated in this document, the initial step towards achieving *integrazione scolastica* is to transform the entire education system, its methodology and its conceptualisation (D'Alessio, 2011). Furthermore, the national investigation concluded that the school is the optimal setting for students with developmental disorders or learning difficulties. This document marks the beginning of a radical transformation of the education system and traditional teaching methods, which will have a profound influence on subsequent policies regarding inclusive education.

In 1977, the Italian Parliament approved Law No. 517, mandating that all primary and middle school-aged children with disabilities, regardless of the severity of their impairment, should receive their education in mainstream classrooms alongside their peers in the public school system. This legislation is regarded as the first to abolish differential classes and pave the way for the definitive closure of special schools (D'Alessio, 2011, 2012; Kanter et al., 2014). The objective of Law No. 517/1977 was to provide additional resources to enhance the capacity of mainstream schools. This included the provision of specialised support teachers, the implementation of specific training programs for them, and the establishment of procedures for educational planning, resolving building-related issues, and providing transportation services. Furthermore, the law prompted changes to mainstream education, such as adjustments to class sizes and the number of support teachers assigned to classrooms with students with disabilities. However, the medical model of disability remained embedded in Law No. 517/1977, assuming that individual impairments required medical specialists rather than addressing social barriers. As a result of this legislation and other relevant laws, including Law No. 270/1982 and Italy's Constitutional Court's Sentence 2155 of 1987, special schools and classes

were progressively abolished. All students with disabilities, irrespective of the degree of impairment, were permitted to attend mainstream schools, including kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, and post-secondary school.

Integrazione scolastica: the milestone for achieving inclusive education

In 1992, Law No. 104 was enacted, henceforth known as the "*Legge Quadro*" which was designed to eliminate social barriers for individuals with disabilities. This represents a significant milestone in the pursuit of inclusive education in Italy and continues to serve as the overarching framework for social inclusion. Indeed, this legislation provided a framework for integrating persons with disabilities into society, encompassing all aspects of individual life and participation in the life of their community. These aspects include labour and employment (Arts. 18 and 19), sports and travel (Art. 23), health and citizenship, removal of architectural barriers (Art. 24), public and individual transport (Arts. 26 and 27), and so forth. In the context of education, the legislation prioritised the establishment of networks among institutional bodies, including local education authorities, local health units, and schools. This paved the way for implementing innovative teaching and learning approaches, such as team teaching and cooperative learning, across all grade levels—from infant schools to universities—and across all sectors of society, from training centres to employment settings. As D'Alessio (ib.) observes in her critical review, the intention of this legislation was to guarantee that all students at school age receive an education and to eliminate segregated positions. From a didactic perspective, the most significant advancement proposed by this legislation was the mandate to develop a P.E.I. (*Piano Educativo Individualizzato*, or Individualised Educational Plan) for each student with a disability. The P.E.I. is the document in which the integrated and balanced interventions are described. These interventions are prepared for students with disabilities for a specific period of time to realise their right to education and instruction. They are designed for the current school year and are based on data from the *diagnosi funzionale* (functional diagnosis) and the *profilo dinamico funzionale* (functional dynamic profile). Proactive interventions are integrated to draft a P.E.I. tailored to the student's disabilities, difficulties, and potential (Presidential Decree 02/24/1994 – Art. 5). The structuring of the P.E.I. is a complex process, acting as a reasoned map of all intervention projects. This includes didactic-educational, rehabilitative, socialisation, and integration projects, both within and outside the school environment.