

Paraprofessionals in Italy: Perspectives From an Inclusive Country

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Since 1977, Italy has largely eliminated special schools and special classes in favor of neighborhood school placements where students with disabilities are served primarily in general education classes. Overall class sizes are small and caseloads of special education teachers are very favorable (about two students with disabilities for each special education teacher). Because of these factors, it was thought that attitudes toward the role of paraprofessionals in Italian schools would differ from those toward paraprofessionals in the United States, where many paraprofessionals take on a more independent role in inclusive classrooms. In this discussion article, we suggest that the role of paraprofessionals might be viewed differently in Italy than in the United States, and that these differences may reflect differing levels of available support for inclusive classrooms.

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The number and roles of paraprofessionals in special education have changed and grown substantially in recent years (French, 1998; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999). In 1993, Jones and Bender, in a review, described the growth of the use of paraprofessionals in special education, but acknowledged that little attention had been paid to the use of paraprofessionals in inclusive settings. By 1995, Wolery, Werts, Caldwell, Snyder, and Lisowski maintained that "the use of paraprofessionals in the [inclusive] classroom has not been extensively researched" (p. 24). The 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) amendments provided the most specific discussion of the appropriate uses of paraprofessionals of any IDEA legislation to date, providing further support for the increasing importance of the role of paraprofessionals in implementing the requirements of IDEA (French, 1998).

Marks et al. (1999) interviewed a sample of paraprofessionals working in inclusive settings. Their responses suggested that their critical roles included helping the

student not be a "bother" to the teacher, meeting the student's immediate academic needs, being the "expert" on the student, and being an advocate for inclusion. Many of these conclusions were corroborated by an earlier investigation by Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, and MacFarland (1997), who collected observational and interview data on school personnel. These results point to paraprofessionals who, at least in many instances, feel somewhat disconnected from the classroom as a whole, and feel that they provide an independent role with a high degree of responsibility for the education of students with disabilities in inclusive settings. Indeed, Marks et al. (1999) stated, "Without the presence of the paraeducator, the educational benefits for the inclusion student would have been extremely minimal" (p. 324).

This very high level of personal responsibility perhaps is reflective of the degree to which special education teachers are presently stretched. As a consequence, they are less able to deliver instruction and support to students with disabilities placed in an increasingly large number of inclusive settings:

Too often, in our experience, special educators assigned to this role [overseeing inclusion students' educational needs] have high caseloads, resulting in extremely limited time for the level of ongoing support that is necessary for daily academic and curricular modifications. Again, in the absence of such resources, paraeducators will likely continue to assume roles that others more qualified should assume (Marks et al., 1999, p. 327).

In this article, we present a different perspective on paraprofessionals, from the point of view of a country that has practiced educational inclusion for over 20 years. First, we discuss briefly the history of special education legislation and policy in Italy, and discuss how these may have impacted the numbers and uses of paraprofessionals in that country. Next, we describe the results of a preliminary survey that was recently conducted to describe the roles of paraprofessionals in Italy. Finally, we make some comparisons between paraprofessionals in Italian schools and paraprofession-

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als in schools in the United States. We suggest that the roles of paraprofessionals can be greatly influenced by policies toward educational inclusion and by the resources allocated to promote those policies.

Special Education in Italy

Clearly, the role of paraprofessionals has become of critical importance as more students with disabilities are being served in inclusive settings (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000). Because the move toward using paraprofessionals in inclusive classrooms is relatively recent in the United States, it may be of interest to examine how similar issues are addressed in Italy, a country that has been highly inclusive in its educational programming for over 20 years.

Italy's Law 517, passed in 1977, largely eliminated special schools and special classes in favor of large-scale placement of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Although, like IDEA, several amendments have been made to this legislation over the years, in each case the mandate for inclusive education has been either maintained or strengthened (Cornoldi, Terreni, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 1998; Vianello, 1996).

One significant difference between special education programs in Italy and the United States is that Italian law does not acknowledge learning disabilities as a disability category; as a consequence, the "mild disabilities" areas are less highly represented in special education (Cornoldi, 1991; Fabbro & Masutto, 1994). Because of this, fewer than one half of the proportion of students with disabilities identified in the United States are identified in Italy (U.S. Department of Education, 1998; Vianello, 1996). Nevertheless, special education teachers are free to work with any student who is in need of special assistance (Vianello, 1996).

Law 517 also provided substantial personnel supports to help inclusive classrooms succeed. Teachers are generally to have no more than a single student with a disability per class. The total number of students in inclusive classrooms is generally not intended to exceed 20, although this number has increased somewhat in recent years. For each student classified as having a disability, teachers receive support from a special education teacher (*insegnante di sostegno*, or support teacher) for between 6 to 18 hours per week (Del Ben, 1996). Each special education teacher can have no more than four students with disabilities, with the present ratio being about one special education teacher to 2.2 students with disabilities (Vianello, 1996). This level of support is one that many teachers in the United States agree is needed for inclusion to succeed, yet it is rarely observed in practice (Miller, Brownell, & Smith, 1999; Myles & Simpson, 1989; Werts, Wolery, Snyder, Caldwell, & Salisbury, 1996).

Although the Italian caseload is very favorable, it

may not actually be an impossibility, as it may appear, for schools in the United States. Italian special education teachers are also free to work with other students who are experiencing learning problems, such as those characterized as having learning disabilities in the United States. With a caseload of four students in four classrooms, these teachers could conceivably serve as many as 10–15 students with special learning needs in these four classrooms. Viewed in this way, Italian special education teachers may have an effective caseload that is highly desirable, yet still attainable for schools in the United States.

Because of these highly favorable conditions, Italian teachers may feel more supportive of inclusion than their counterparts in the United States, and in fact, this appears to be the case. In Italy, a recent survey indicated that 77.6% of teachers supported the concept of inclusive education, with only 4.8% disagreeing with the concept (Cornoldi et al., 1998). Mega, Castellini, and Vianello (1997) also reported similar findings. In contrast, fewer teachers in the United States supported the concept of the type of extensive inclusion practiced in Italy, with figures reported from 40.5% (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996) to 26% (Dev & Scruggs, 1997). However, like their counterparts in the United States, most Italian teachers believed that they needed more time, training, assistance, and resources (Cornoldi et al., 1998). This issue of personnel assistance is a significant one in both countries (Scruggs, 1997).

There have been some recent changes to the integration process in Italian schools. Past ratios of students with disabilities to special education teachers have been about 2.2:1 or, in effect, about one special education teacher for each 138 students with or without disabilities in a school. This rule was changed in 1997–1998, so that the number of special education teachers would be associated with the total number of students (138), whether or not they were classified as having disabilities. The advantage of this change was that assignment of labels was not necessary to have a specific number of special education teachers. Special education teachers could hold stable positions in their schools, independent of the presence or absence of a specific number of special education students enrolled in the school in a given year. Unfortunately, along with this change, a reduction in school funds was made, so that the average class size has increased somewhat. Nevertheless, the majority of classes containing students with disabilities during school year 1998–1999 had fewer than 25 total students and the ratio of students with disabilities to special education teachers was still very favorable.

The Roles of Paraprofessionals in Italian Schools

In Italy, educational services are centralized, with most of the educational resources provided by the na-

tional government in Rome (Scurati, 1995). However, paraprofessionals are recruited by local education agencies, so national data concerning the numbers of paraprofessionals working in inclusive classrooms are not available. The national position is that special education and general education teachers should be primarily responsible for the education of students with disabilities. Because support for inclusive education is provided by small class sizes and favorable caseloads for special education teachers, education is intended to be conducted largely by general education teachers, special education teachers, and other students in group work, cooperative learning, and other peer mediated activities. For these reasons, paraprofessionals are not nearly as common in Italian schools as they are in schools in the United States. National data on paraprofessionals are not collected. However, a recent study by a national special education organization suggested that only about 25% of Italian school districts, and only about 10% of individual school buildings, presently employ paraprofessionals (CNIS, 1999).

Generally, paraprofessionals are used for situations in which students are not independent in basic functioning, such as toileting and mobility; presumably, for about 10% of students with mental retardation. They also cover school hours when the special education teacher is not present, so that students with disabilities can be maximally involved in classroom activities. Because many schools are open only from about 8:30 a.m. to about 1:00 p.m., paraprofessionals are also employed in afterschool activities.

Paraprofessionals are not required to have a teaching certificate, although many do have a higher educational background. They are often encouraged to take short courses in teaching skills, especially behavioral skills for students with severe disabilities. Often this coursework is taken along with other professionals (e.g., teachers, physical therapists, speech therapists) to promote the idea of educational integration.

Views of the Roles of Paraprofessionals

In order to examine the roles of paraprofessionals in a country where there is substantial teaching support for inclusion, a preliminary survey was recently conducted on the uses and expectations of paraprofessionals in Italy in selected schools that employed paraprofessionals (Palladino, Cornoldi, Vianello, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 1999). The survey was administered to selected school personnel in 14 preschools, elementary schools, and junior high schools in the vicinities of Padua and Milan, in northern Italy, who were directly working with, or who had recently worked with, paraprofessionals. Because paraprofessionals are not frequently employed in Italian schools, schools were selected for this survey that had a history of hiring paraprofessionals. The 37 professionals surveyed were asked to answer questions about 43 specific parapro-

fessionals in their schools. They were also asked about their perspectives on the role of paraprofessionals in general. In the following section, we describe the scope and results of this survey.

The median number of students in each school in the survey was 190 (range 17–1,200); the median number of students with disabilities per school was 7 (range 1–60), or about 4% of the school population. These proportions are higher than those found in the country in general, which may explain why these schools elected to hire paraprofessionals. Each school had a median of 4.5 special education teachers (range = 1–30), or a little more than one special education teacher for two students with disabilities. Thirty-seven percent (16) of the paraprofessionals described in this survey were licensed teachers, and another 19% (8) were considered to have a high level of professional preparation. This may be due in part to a relative scarcity of available teaching positions in Italy at the present time. These paraprofessionals spent an average of 19.0 hours (range 6–26 hours) per week with students with disabilities, 11.9 hours of which were spent in the general education classroom. Other hours may have included work with the students outside the general education classroom or time spent with the student after regular school hours.

Although 39.5% (17) of the paraprofessionals were described as being in the class only “partially,” 46.5% (20) were described as being present in the class most of the time. Nearly three fourths of the paraprofessionals worked primarily with students with moderate or severe mental retardation, and about one half were also described as working with students with moderate or severe motor or sensory impairments.

Perspectives on roles of paraprofessionals. The 37 school personnel responding to the survey were asked to rate on a scale of 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive) their overall judgment or opinion (“*giudizio complessivo*”) on the use of paraprofessionals in schools. The mean rating was 5.0, equivalent to a rating of “somewhat positive.” With respect to the role of paraprofessionals, the majority believed that an important role of paraprofessionals should be “*accompagnamento*,” that is, to accompany students who are unable to move independently. Thirty-three (89.2%) perceived that paraprofessionals should address autonomy or self-help goals such as toileting. About one half reported that the paraprofessionals should work on basic educational goals such as writing, and most respondents agreed that the goals addressed should be coordinated with overall class goals. Respondents generally believed that paraprofessionals should be highly trained, with 73% reporting that a teacher license or high level of training would be desirable. This may be because many of the teachers were accustomed to working with paraprofessionals with higher levels of training.

Finally, respondents in this survey were asked to rate on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) the extent

to which paraprofessionals should be supervised by and associated with specific school professionals. General and special education teachers and school psychologists expressed very high levels of agreement that paraprofessionals should work very closely with other teachers and school professionals (means of 6.4, 6.8, and 6.4, respectively).

Summary

Examination of relevant legislation and the preliminary results of a recent survey suggest that there are very different perspectives on the roles of paraprofessionals in the United States and Italy. These appear to be associated with the supports that are provided to teachers in the two countries.

Recent research in the United States suggests that many paraprofessionals in inclusive classrooms see themselves (and are seen by others) as independently and primarily responsible for the education and well-being of students with disabilities. Their perceived role is to serve as advocates for inclusion, to see that students with disabilities are not a "burden" to the classroom teacher, and to help meet the student's immediate learning needs (Marks et al., 1999). In some cases, the student-paraprofessional role may be so isolating that it hinders contact with other students, a primary purpose of inclusion (Giangreco et al., 1997). In other cases, a student with special needs may receive "inadequate, unsupervised instruction" in a parallel education program from a paraprofessional in the back of the classroom (Giangreco, 1997, p. 57). These roles do not appear to have been directly planned, but appear to have emerged as a consequence of classroom teacher attitudes, lack of teacher resources, and the high caseloads of special education teachers (Marks et al., 1999). As a consequence, the skills and education of the paraprofessional may be of critical importance (French, 1998).

In the recent pilot survey of Italian teachers and other school personnel we reviewed, respondents seemed to hold views of the roles of paraprofessionals that differed from the views of professionals in the United States. In Italy, paraprofessionals appear to be relied upon far less than they are in the United States. When paraprofessionals were employed, they worked mostly with students with moderate to severe mental and physical/sensory disabilities, for a substantial amount of time both in and out of the regular classroom. Respondents to the survey perceived that paraprofessionals should work primarily on motor and self-help/autonomy skills, in partnership with the special education teacher, the classroom teacher, and the school psychologist. About one half believed that paraprofessionals should have responsibilities for academic learning. In fact, most respondents expressed skepticism about use of paraprofessionals for teaching, but

some may have been influenced more positively because of the fact that many paraprofessionals held teaching licensure. More than one half perceived that the student's goals should be coordinated by the paraprofessional with the overall classroom goals (Marks et al., 1999). The overall rating of the value of paraprofessionals (5 on a 7 point scale) was satisfactory, but not as high as would be expected if respondents regarded paraprofessionals as being absolutely necessary for the success of the student in the inclusive classroom. However, because this survey offered only preliminary data, the results should be regarded as tentative.

There are many cultural, social, and economic differences between Italy and the United States that no doubt play a role in the observed differences in paraprofessional roles. The personal observations of the two American coauthors of this article, after several visits to Italy, suggest that this approach to inclusive education is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather seems related to some larger cultural differences impacting on social policy. Law 517 and its mandated teacher caseloads seem to us to be not unrelated to other social policies, such as low cost university education open to all high school graduates, national health insurance, and relatively extensive social security benefits. That is, Italian society and government appear to us to place a very high priority on the social well-being of its citizens, Law 517 being one manifestation of that priority.

It seems clear that as students with disabilities move to inclusive classrooms, and away from concentrated special classrooms, the need for qualified special education teachers who can enter these inclusive environments increases, and must be met if inclusion is to succeed. Italy appears to have addressed this challenge by guaranteeing small caseloads to its special education teachers; how the United States will ultimately meet this challenge is yet to be determined.

Overall, it seems that the roles of paraprofessionals in Italy and the United States are viewed differently. These differences may reflect the relatively small class sizes, favorable special education teacher caseloads, and the smaller number of students with identified disabilities in Italy. However, the sample from the survey of school personnel was limited with respect to size and sampling and the use of a single source of self-report data. Further, complete research on the role of paraprofessionals in schools in the United States is not yet available (Giangreco et al., 1997; Marks et al., 1999; Wolery et al., 1995). Conclusions should, therefore, be regarded as tentative. At present, however, the implication seems to be that it is difficult, if not impossible, to evaluate the role of paraprofessionals outside of the context of the entire system of special and inclusive education. From the present comparative analysis, it appears that the role of paraprofessionals is largely dependent on the model of inclusion employed in the

schools and the amount of resources that are available to serve this model. As schools begin to provide the resources necessary for inclusion to succeed, paraprofessionals in the United States can begin to assume a more realistic role, as a true collaborative partner integrated fully within the culture of the school.

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