

Our Autism World



ITALY



An Italian Experience.



by **Paola Molteni**



Paola Molteni is a consultant and researcher on Autism Spectrum Disorders and scholastic inclusion at the Catholic University of Milan, Italy.

The Italian history of scholastic inclusion for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders began in the late 1960s when there was a kind of 'cultural' revolution. At the heart of it there was hope for a better and more inclusive society; an inclusive education was considered the first step to reach this goal.

At that time, professionals working in the special needs system and in residential institutions for individuals with disability, convinced many parents to take their children out of these structures, believing in the importance of inclusion. They advised parents to enrol their children in mainstream schools. It was a wide phenomenon and tens of thousands of children with disabilities left the institutions and the special-needs schools, which, for that time, continued to exist.

In 1971 the law granting all pupils, with the exception of only the most severe cases, the right to fulfil their potential in local mainstream schools, officially reflected this change in attitude and practice of school management.

In 1977 a new parliamentary act established inclusion for all students aged 6-14 years, irrespective of their impairment, with the consequent closure of most of special schools and institutions.

There was an obligation for an Individualised Educational Programme (IED) to be maintained by the class teacher, with the help of a specialised assistant teacher working in the classroom.

Finally, in 1992 the Italian Parliament approved the Disabled Persons Bill (L.104/92), which included several articles stating the principles for good quality inclusion in any educational provision.

Thanks to these laws, every pupil with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is entitled to attend school, even after compulsory school, from kindergarten to university. Instruments and methods are provided according to the different kinds of school, in order to ensure the inclusion and education of each student. During the scholastic year 2011/12, around 18.000 students with ASD attended Italian compulsory schools.



wonderful and positive

Being a pedagogical consultant and researcher on Autism Spectrum Disorders and scholastic inclusion at the Catholic University of Milan has given me the great opportunity to meet and collaborate with many school teams devoted to realise an efficient and effective inclusion for students with ASD.

In Italy, there is a growing attention for the challenges related to having a child with autism in a mainstream classroom and, unluckily, there is still no specific training in higher education or in-service courses for teachers and scholastic professionals to be prepared properly for working with students with ASD. For these reasons, there is a profound need of reflection on what should be done in Italy to support the learning and developing of children that are attending mainstreams provisions and many positive experiences are happening every day in our schools that confirm the greatness of believing that inclusion is possible and achievable.

I would like to tell you more about one of the wonderful and positive experiences lived by a primary mainstream class composed by thirteen 8-years-old pupils that welcomes every day two students with autism.

It is very unusual that more than one pupil with ASD is attending the same classroom and this is one of the reasons that makes this experience significant to disclose.

Three main teachers, a teacher's assistant and a social worker compose the class team and I weekly provide the needed supervision and guidance on the ASD topic.

During the second year, we felt the need to properly explain to the classmates what is autism, involving the whole group of students in realising a designed activity to help them to learn and understand what is this "special" condition.

Through a circle time, we listened the class experience on how they felt in living together with somebody with ASD: this activity was fundamental to give voice to each student, with no shame or prejudice. Everybody had enough time to express, with simple words, how they felt, how the class overcame the challenges and what makes the group wonderful in relation to autism. A storyboard was written and the whole class realised a touching puppet show to tell their positive experience with these "special" classmates.



touching puppet show



The students were very honest in expressing the challenges and the problems in behaviour and relationship attitude met in the classmates with autism, but they spontaneously underlined how is it possible to become friends and living positively together, learning from each other.

The video produced during this activity was submitted for the Italian national school contest "Tell me your experience with a classmate with Autism Spectrum Disorder." The judging was in mid June and went very well: our video got the special jury prize.

The experience was very successful and helped everybody, adults and pupils, to enlighten the resources implemented when a child with Autism is attending a mainstream class: he or she is not a limit or just a challenge, but a source of important opportunities of development and learning for the whole group.

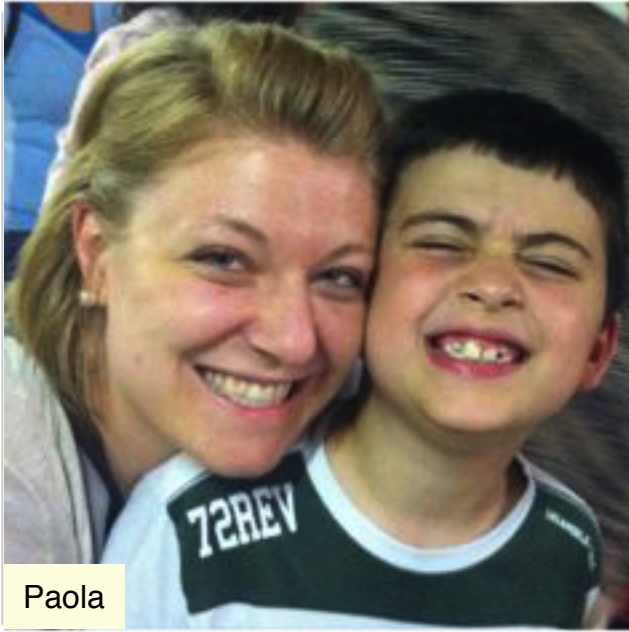
I believe that today's mainstream school in Italy has shown that:

- It is possible and necessary to work
- in this field on behalf of individuals with Autism and the whole of society, as this experience have shown;
- It is necessary to provide methods and procedures for this, while being aware that others will be found on the way;
- Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders are still able to amaze us, every day.

The way to inclusion isn't easy but it is possible to achieve, developing shared perspectives with all the individuals and professionals involved in the child's education and supporting properly mainstream teachers in their daily work at school.



the students spontaneously underlined how is it possible



“The way to inclusion isn't easy but it is possible to achieve...”

Paola Molteni

CLICK ON PICTURE BELOW WHEN ONLINE TO VIEW VIDEO



Concorso
“Ho un compagno molto speciale...
Raccontami l'Autismo”

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Paola Molteni and teachers Daniela Seveso and Jessica Marotta's video which won the Special Jury Prize at the Italian national school contest