



Comparing Inclusive Education: Teachers' Struggles in Italy and China by Lishuai Jia and Marina Santi (2025)

Comparing Inclusive Education: Teachers' Struggles in Italy and China offers an ambitious and timely contribution to the international literature on inclusive education. Lishuai Jia and Marina Santi present a rigorous comparative study that examines the lived realities of teachers in Italy and China, two countries with distinct historical, cultural, and political trajectories but shared commitments to developing more inclusive educational systems. Through a nuanced qualitative methodology and an explicitly dialogical approach, the authors invite readers to reconsider inclusion not as a universal, uniform model, but as a culturally embedded, evolving, and context-dependent process.

The opening chapter establishes the conceptual foundations of the volume by tracing the global evolution of inclusive education from human rights frameworks, most notably the 1994 Salamanca Statement, to its contemporary role as a cornerstone of international education policy. The authors adeptly synthesize contested definitions of inclusion, highlighting tensions between access, participation, equity, and quality. This theoretical groundwork highlights the persistent diversity in how inclusion is understood worldwide and sets the stage for the book's comparative inquiry. Particularly compelling is the authors' standpoint that inclusion must be read through multiple lenses, human rights, social justice, pedagogical innovation, while acknowledging the continued challenges posed by entrenched educational structures.

Chapter 2 provides a systematic comparison of the Italian and Chinese policy landscapes. Italy's longstanding tradition of *integrazione scolastica*, reinforced by legislation such as Law 104/1992, is juxtaposed with China's more recent but rapidly expanding reforms, exemplified by the "Learning in Regular Classrooms" initiative and the development of Learning Resource Centers. While Italy positions inclusion as a cultural and ethical commitment grounded in egalitarian and social solidarity values, China's system reflects a more centralized structure marked by strong governmental oversight and persistent disparities across regions. The authors carefully unpack these differences without resorting to simplification, instead demonstrating how cultural legacies, Catholic social principles in Italy, Confucian values and exam-oriented structures in China, shape teachers' attitudes and systemic possibilities.

Chapters 3 and 4 constitute the empirical core of the book, offering in-depth analyses of teachers' perceptions in both countries stemming from interviews structured on an adapted empirical application of the *Understanding by Design* framework (Camedda & Santi, 2016; Wiggings & McTighe, 2005). The Italian case study reveals complex and sometimes conflicting interpretations of inclusion. Teachers articulate longstanding concerns regarding resource shortages, class size, and continuity of support personnel, while also illustrating a strong commitment to inclusion as an evolving ethical and pedagogical project. The authors' attention to historical shifts, from pre-1977 exclusionary practices to contemporary challenges, adds depth and nuance to these narratives. The corresponding chapter on China uncovers significant structural barriers that shape teachers' engagement with inclusion, including insufficient specialized training, large class sizes, and limited availability of professional support teachers. The predominance of a medical or deficit-oriented conceptualization of disability emerges clearly from the interviews, reflecting broader societal understandings and policy framings. Nevertheless, teachers also express strong aspirations for improvement, pointing toward systemic and curricular reforms as prerequisites for more effective practice. The contrast between policy ambition and everyday classroom realities is one of the most insightful aspects of this chapter.

Chapter 5 synthesizes the cross-cultural findings, drawing attention to convergences, such as the shared



value placed on diversity and the need for additional support, and divergences in how inclusion is idealized, operationalized, and constrained. The authors' use of the six analytical dimensions of *Understanding by Design* (explanation, application, self-awareness, empathy, perspective, interpretation) offers a refined lens through which to understand teachers' complex professional and cultural positioning. While teachers in both countries emphasize the value of diversity, the need for targeted support, and the importance of the physical presence of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, their underlying understandings of inclusion differ markedly. Italian teachers tend to frame inclusion as a value-driven, transformative project rooted in long-standing cultural and legislative traditions, whereas Chinese teachers often approach inclusion through a more pragmatic lens shaped by resource availability, policy constraints, and prevailing social attitudes. This comparative perspective encourages readers to move beyond dichotomies and instead recognize the multiplicity of inclusive pathways emerging across educational systems.

The sixth and concluding chapter offers a theoretical reflection by situating the Italian and Chinese experiences within broader cultural imaginaries of diversity. The authors draw on the notion of "harmony without sameness", a heuristic lens for rethinking how educational communities might sustain plurality without erasing particularity, challenging assimilationist tendencies while avoiding superficial accommodation. By foregrounding these philosophical traditions, the authors introduce a culturally situated contribution to global inclusion debates and reinforce the book's broader argument: that meaningful international dialogue depends on engaging seriously with distinct epistemological and ethical foundations, and that inclusive education can flourish only when diversity is embraced as a source of enrichment and mutual development.

Overall, *Comparing Inclusive Education: Teachers' Struggles in Italy and China* is characterized by methodological transparency, cultural sensitivity, and sustained attention to teachers' perspectives. By integrating policy analysis, historical contextualization, and phenomenologically oriented empirical work, the volume contributes to comparative education and inclusive pedagogy in a way that remains attentive to complexity. For scholars, policymakers, and practitioners engaged in the pursuit of equitable schooling, Jia and Santi's work provides an illuminating and thought-provoking resource. It reminds us that inclusion is not a fixed model to be disseminated globally, but a dynamic process shaped by cultural traditions, political choices, and the everyday efforts of educators who navigate its complexities.

References

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