



# Education of Deaf Students in Italy

RICCI PAPER IN ROME

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## Foreword

This paper on the current climate of deaf education is an attempt to put together all of the secondary and primary research that I have done on the current atmosphere in Italy. This paper is written with the expectation to be compared with similar research that will be conducted in Vietnam; specifically, Ho Chi Minh City. This paper is not meant to be all inclusive research on the education of deaf individuals in Italy. The research that has been concluded and included in this paper is modeled by what was feasible for the primary investigator and the findings in this paper are meant to be conclusions and deductions made by the author. Much of the key areas and principles are expected to be directly comparable to what will be researched and discovered in Vietnam.

An important note that is not directly referenced in the paper but should be mentioned anyway is how the nation of Italy developed its deaf education. In modern times, the Italian state is comparatively new to its fellow developed nations and this places an important role in the educational development of deaf students. Those who have deafness are part of a small minority in the world and even more so within Italy. It was not until the unification of Italy that deaf individuals were able to receive significant and relatively consistent education at formal schools across Italy. Most of these schools were run by Catholic priests and

the curriculum depended upon the school and the priests at the school. Until that all changed with the law of 104(72).

## Introduction

This paper is the first part of a one to one comparison of Italy and Vietnam. The focus of this paper is to profile the schooling of deaf individuals who live in the country of Italy. The country, which has undergone a significant amount of change throughout its time, provides different levels and different types of support and schooling. This paper utilizes data from the government of Italy, interviews of teachers within the state system, and secondary material from outside the primary research methods and private sources. The purpose of this paper is to portray, as accurately as possible, the positives, negatives, and challenges that are present in the Italian state for deaf students.

## Recent Major History

Education for the deaf in Italy as it is known in modern history began in 1972. During this year, law 104 was passed. This law pertains specifically to anyone in Italy with disabilities as it guaranteed a right to work and education. (Einaudi, 1948) This document has become the foundation for the education of deaf individuals in Italy as it presents the idea of integration. It is important to note that the law is an evolution of the third and fourth clauses in the constitution of Italy which mention 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”. (Einaudi, 1948)

Integration is the modern philosophy brought forward by the government of Italy for nonstandard education. The concept of integration is to bring students who do not meet the criteria for the idea of a typical student into the standard education system to provide a level and equal education for all students. In practice, this has brought students who have disabilities in to classrooms which are full of students whose education system has been tailored to them. This allows students with disabilities to experience what is considered a normal education. The positive of this practice is that students, both hearing and non-hearing, get to practice and understand how to act in a diverse community. Deaf students get to practice their social skills and hearing students have the opportunity to learn that deafness, which can be stigmatized, is not something out of the ordinary. (Dolza, Interview on Education for Deaf, 2019) However, the disadvantage of this system is that deaf students might not receive the necessary educational supplements that are required by them to receive a usable education. Due to these natural barriers present, deaf students naturally receive less applicable education than their hearing peers.

## Direct State Support

The government of Italy recognizes that integration presents a logistical problem and provides support for deaf students to help provide equity in their education for these students in the public education sector. The country of Italy provides support in three main branches, the Second Teacher, the Communication Assistant, and speech therapy.

### Second Teacher

The first branch is in classroom support with assistants for the deaf students. Through the national health care plan, deaf students have access to two different types of classroom assistants. (Logsdon, 2019) The first helper works for the Ministry of Education named Docente di Sostegno or simply “second teacher”. The second teacher works within the school system, creating a personalized support system for the students in traditional classrooms. These teachers work directly with the student, often times next to the student while taking notes of what the teacher is saying which is then given to the deaf student. The second teacher works similarly as a translator, and not as much with the comprehension of the material.

Unfortunately, the amount of time that a student has access to this secondary teacher is fewer than the number of times that they are with only the

main teacher. (Dolza, Interview on Education for Deaf, 2019) This lack of access is due to the second teacher being generalized in their teaching and not specialized for deaf students since they work with all disabled students. Ideally, this would be the role of the communication assistant, however, the roles of both overlap each other. (Meo S. D., 2019) This generalization is because of the integration policies put forth by the state.

### **Communication assistant**

Another form of support provided by the state is the Communication assistant (Assistente all'autonomia e alla comunicazione). This individual works with students in the classroom as well, however, they can work in the home of a student as well as in the classroom, school and with other assistive services provided by the state. The assistant is provided by the state due to law however they do not directly report to the state in the same way that the second teacher reports to the ministry of education. They are hired in the same vein as contractors. The function of the communication assistant is not transcribing the lessons taught in class but to provide a more rounded and concrete comprehension for the student. The most important part of the assistant is that they work in a more specialized manner to help a student become more autonomous by intervening in the classroom or at home based on the individual and their needs. Since the assistant does not work directly for the government, they can and often know Italian Sign Language, allowing the activities provided by

the assistant makes them more tailored to the student. Since Italian Sign Language is not formally recognized by the Italian government, teachers are not required to know it. With that said, it is common to see government broadcasts with a sign language interpreter in it. According to the Province of Milan, the assistant performs a list of duties including but not limited to,

- the expression and communication of the young person receiving the service so that it is sufficiently comprehensible, thus offering support to the work carried out by the rehabilitation services (speech therapy), for the increase of his personal and social autonomy;
- the task of mediation in listening to the classroom lessons to promote the understanding of verbal language and access to educational content;
- the reworking of the school contents of the texts, with logical conceptual maps or other suitable systems, and the reworking and adaptation of the periodic checks in equivalent tests provided by the teachers, to ensure the adequacy to the level of mastery of the communication systems of the child;
- the achievement of good written and spoken language skills;
- the task of mediation in the relationship with its teachers and in the classroom relationship with peers;
- the task of "communicative mediator" in unfavorable contexts (e.g. in noisy environments, during group discussions, etc.);
- for deaf "scoring" pupils, the translation of the verbal messages that take place in the context of the classroom in L.I.S. (Italian Sign Language) and those of the boy's L.I.S., into verbal messages;
- the boy's acquisition of a method of study;
- the proper use of prosthetic aids and educational software or hardware for the child or his teachers;
- periodic participation in the sessions with the speech therapist to learn methodologies, techniques and appropriate teaching tools to be repeated at school and to be shared with teachers, especially in the early years of school, so that the rehabilitation and school can be integrated effectively. (Provincia Di Milano)

These are the basic outlines of the communication assistant for the province of Milan. However, the assistant's roles are designated by each local government and can change between region to region. However, this list illustrates what is generally expected of a communication assistant. In short, they work with the student in a more encompassing position than the second teacher who works with the student solely in the classroom.

The third branch that is offered by the state of Italy is the one on one speech counseling. This area is designed to help students outside of the direct academic setting. In comparison with other countries who use the bimodal method of teaching, which focuses on sign language paired with written or oral language, the state of Italy supports the use of a relaxed oral and written Italian teaching. Although this is a service that is available for students, families have reported doctors told them to pass on using the speech therapy service. (Dolza, Interview on Education for Deaf, 2019) The reason is unknown as to why they encourage families to pass up on a free service.

## Laws

An aspect of the education system in Italy that can be considered unique is that they have put in place laws that pertain to individuals with disabilities and



treat them as a whole. The terms of the laws put into place standards that affect those with disabilities as a whole, instead of breaking the law into different sections that affect each disabled group separately. This grouping of all the disabled groups under an umbrella concept is a unique aspect of Italy in comparison with other developed countries. This umbrella concept refers to the integration model that Italy follows. This integration grouping is a precursor to the inclusion versus integration debate which is conversed in greater detail later on in the paper. These laws that combine disabled groups together are major influences on the education standards that are present in Italy for deaf students.

Law 104 is the bedrock law for deaf students and individuals since it guarantees the right to work and education. The law specifically mentions the use of integration which is why the law has the gravity it holds for deaf individuals. Other important laws include law 21 in 1950 that developed the National Federation of Institutes of Education for the deaf (ENS), and a presidential decree in 1979 that removed the ENS from being a public institution to a private one. (Italy, 1950) This change set an example for private institutions to carry a significant amount of responsibilities for deaf individuals. Lastly, the most recent updates to the legal system were in 2006. These laws were in part encouraged by the European Union to acknowledge the rights of deaf and disabled citizens. (Disabilities, 2006) Since this is the latest major government document, there has

been no significant change to deaf rights or education expectations in over a decade.

### Disadvantages to students

The disadvantages that students experience during their schoolings is a combination of factors that are not limited to; easy access to schools, adequate education, and external support. Deaf students and those with disabilities have to encounter additional barriers that would not be present if they were a standard student. This is brought about by having a schooling system designed for students with all senses that are fully functioning. It is the nature of the integration system that presents these obstacles to the students. The question to ask because of this is what barriers do deaf students face?

Deaf students in addition to their normal studies, face multiple barriers that can potentially prevent their learning and skill development. In addition to this, students face social development barriers and identity development. Students are confronted with these problems because of their unique situation of being deaf. By being integrated into the system, they become exposed to various pressures and social constructions due to the nature of integration. Students must learn to work with the challenges that are present due to the lack of attention that is needed for the student's comprehension acquisition. They must also face the situation of

being put into an environment that is designed for hearing students and being surrounded by hearing students. This poses communication problems, as well as being able to successfully integrate themselves into the community. A common side effect of this is experiencing loneliness.

The communication assistant can become a powerful ally for the student and their family in this area by facilitating the creation of both an Individualized Educational Plan and a Project of Life. (Lanes, 2006) The projects are flexible plans designed with the deaf student to help the student grow and develop. The education plan is made with the student, teachers, and other members who are involved with the education of the pupil. The plan outlines “shared objectives”, (Lanes, 2006) possible educational paths, and lastly ways to evaluate and verify the success of the student. The Project of life, on the other hand, is a more open ended document. It is designed with the students, families, and communication assistants to help the students grow into themselves; the development and flourishing of independent individuals. Combined, both of these documents help set up the student for success.

### External Community Support

Charities are a good option for students and those involved in the deaf community who need extra support. Large clubs are prolific throughout the country, such as Ente Nazionale Sordi (ENS). This is the premier deaf club that is found throughout the country, with branches for cities in Rome and Turin, as well as regional areas for many of the different regions in the country. ENS provides Italian Sign Language classes for students as well as adults since the language is not offered in typical state schools. Their online presence as well is very up to date, providing news and announcements that relate to the deaf community in Italy in the form of videos. These videos can be accessed on their website as well as YouTube and are all done in Italian Sign Language. The information presented is helpful for students because they inform the deaf community about legislation, social events, and community changes in addition to education throughout the country.

Other organizations such as Mason Perkins Deafness Fund onlus (MPDF onlus) is a charity that is designed for student's success. The group uses their resources to encourage projects that entertain the student's cross-cultural learning, often facilitating immersion events with deaf students from the United States with Italian deaf students in Italy. They also help fund Fulbright scholarships to send students from both the United States and Italy to each other. The foundation also creates educational material because of, "the lack of literature

accessible to the deaf, MPDF onlus organizes workshops for the cultural and linguistic adaptation of classic fairy tales, as well as working for accessible education with the design of materials and events designed to support the activities of those who work in schools”. (La onlus, 2019) This charity is an excellent example of how third party organizations support areas that the state government does not directly help.

Lastly, the Roman Catholic Church provides a small amount of support in a similar way. In the past, the Church ran schools for the deaf, however, today they provide educational material for deaf children. According to Sr. Veronica Donatello, under her care, the church has been creating versions of Catholic material to be used by those with disabilities, particularly deaf individuals, so that they can learn about the religion and participate in the ceremonies as well as translating scripture into videos on YouTube featuring Italian Sign Language. (Donatella, 2019) Their material is made for the deaf and by the deaf, ensuring both the quality of the material and a way of showing that there is a community for the deaf. The church is not very involved with deaf studies however, and the help they provide is solely secondary material for deaf student’s education. However, the material encourages learning because it forces the user to practice Italian Sign Language.

## Inclusion versus Integration

There is a debate between inclusion and integration. The two terms are used interchangeably by people involved in this field, however, their meanings and their effects are considerably different from each other. The concept of inclusion suggests that students are brought into the system and the system changes to fit their needs as well as being culturally changed too. The deaf students would bring something to the community as a whole and the community adapts to having the students with their own unique issues and pros. Theoretically, this would look like schools adjusting their teaching styles to work for both deaf and non-deaf students.

The concept of integration also includes bringing students into their system and community. However, the system does not change with the inclusion of new members. The community simply envelops the minority population and it does not change except in the most minimal forms. The new members are forced to act in the new ways of the community instead of offering their own to help evolve the system. This idea became the concept that the government supported however it is not a perfect system. Students are without communication assistants in the classroom for roughly a third of their time and are unable to comprehend what the teacher is saying. (Dolza, Interview on Education for Deaf, 2019) (Pinna, Rampelli,

Rossini, & Volterra, 1990) In addition to this, students have to learn like a hearing student, which means no use of sign language and an emphasis on oral and written Italian. In an educational aspect, the integration model has flaws. In a social aspect, this model encourages inclusion and this model works for social development and influences independence. The positive to this system, however, is that students are taught from a very young age that deafness and disabilities are not unnatural or unusual. This also teaches deaf students that they belong in the community since the community is treating them as one of their own.

In conclusion, the state of Italy has an imperfect approach with regard to the education of deaf individuals. The country's government offers positive and helpful services to students, specifically the schools designed for disabled students. The country's choice for integration is a double bladed sword, offering a chance for all students to gain an education, but not a stellar education for everyone. There are also negatives to what the country can provide and the lack of basic recognition of Italian Sign Language hinders students and the deaf community as a whole to develop. With that said, the community for deaf students appears to be thriving and provides support where the government does not and the mix between private and public groups creates a comprehensive space for students to thrive.

I cannot come to a full conclusion about the abilities of the current climate due to the amount of information needed to create a solid conclusion as well as the point of this study is to compare Rome with Vietnam. Without making a conclusion, I think it is best to say that Italy is similar to other developed countries in their treatment to deaf individuals. It offers services for disabilities but is not disability focused, allowing for students to slip through the cracks because disabilities are not the main focus of the country.



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