Inclusive classrooms in Italy and England: the role of support teachers and teaching assistants

Cristina Devecchi, Filippo Dettori, Mary Doveston, Paul Sedgwick & Johnston Jament

School of Education, University of Northampton, Northampton, UK
Dipartimento Economia Istituzioni e Società (DEIS), Università degli Studi di Sassari, Italy

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School of Education, University of Northampton, Northampton, UK; Dipartimento Economia Istituzioni e Società (DEIS), Università degli Studi di Sassari, Italy

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Various models of providing for the inclusion of children with disabilities and special needs exist in different European countries. Central to all these models is the notion that support for children and teachers is pivotal in ensuring effective inclusion. This article draws from three qualitative studies on the role, employment and deployment of support teachers in Italy and teaching assistants in England to examine similarities and differences between the two models of provision. The analysis of questionnaires and interviews show that, despite differences in relation to professional qualifications and responsibilities, both support teachers and TAs carry out similar supportive roles, but also share similar feelings of marginalisation, isolation and professional dissatisfaction. The paper raises questions about the effectiveness of providing support from additional adults when such adults are not fully included in the life of the school.

Keywords: inclusion; collaboration; support teachers; teaching assistants; special educational needs; roles

Introduction

Like in many other countries, the effective inclusion of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in both England and Italy is a complex activity which depends on the accurate assessment of children’s needs, effective training of the school workforce, and the availability of multiple kinds of resources. Embedded within a dilemma of difference, in which decisions about which provision is best has to be made ‘when there is a choice between alternatives when neither is favourable’ (Norwich 2008, 288), providing effective education for children with SEND is construed as requiring resources that are additional to and not otherwise available (Florian 2007). Amid such resources there are medical and social service professionals, support teachers (insegnanti di sostegno) in Italy, and teaching assistants (TAs) in England.

The deployment of other adults is based on the contested premise, as Cigman (2007) and Norwich and Lewis (2005) suggest, that the needs of children with SEND are so fundamentally different from those of other children that classroom teachers do not have the experience, knowledge, training, or time to meet them. Such a premise creates both opportunities for creative and effective collaboration.
between classroom teachers and additional adults, and, simultaneously, it gives rise to problematic situations in which both children and additional adults can be marginalised and excluded.

Since in both Italy and England the provision for children with SEND is presently under review (Demo, Zambotti, and Ianes 2011; Department for Education 2011), this paper provides a contribution to the debate by comparing the role of additional adults in the classroom. While aware that, as it will be explained, support teachers in Italy and teaching assistants in England are different in terms of their qualifications and training, they nonetheless share similarities in the way in which their role and professional identity is construed within the discourse and practice of support.

In England, for example, the deployment of TAs and higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs), the latter having gained a status enabling them to plan lessons and take whole classes, is complicated by the still unresolved debate on the limits and appropriateness of how to identify SEN (Florian et al. 2006; Department for Education [DfE] 2011; Ofsted 2010, 2011); the fairness with which financial, material, intellectual and human resources are made available and distributed (Wiebe-Berry 2008); the limitations and/or purpose of deploying additional adults (Blatchford et al. 2009a; Farrell et al. 2010; Webster et al. 2010); and the fairness of their deployment, employment and training opportunities (Cajkler et al. 2007; Devecchi et al. 2010; Devecchi and Rouse 2010; Farrell, Balshaw, and Polat 1999; Hancock, Cable, and Eyres 2010).

In Italy, on the other hand, current education reforms have resulted in cuts to the education budget especially in relation to teachers’ contracts of employment including the contracts of support teachers. The measures adopted have reduced the number of teachers, abolished the practice of co-teaching in primary schools, and have also impacted on the number of support teachers, their deployment and training. Simultaneously, there has been the attempt to redefine and improve the quality of the provision by focusing on the collaboration between teachers, and the partnership with parents (Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca [MIUR] 2009). Yet, as two recent studies show (Associazione TreeLLe et al. 2011; Dettori 2009), over a third of support teachers leave for a permanent post as regular classroom teachers after five years. Lack of support, poor collaboration with colleagues, and a sense of marginalisation are the main reasons for leaving their post.

In both countries, but more so in England, the review of how the ‘other adult’ in the classroom impacts on children’s learning has been focused mainly on children’s attainment (Blatchford et al. 2009a; Howes et al. 2003). The results show that adult support may hinder learning progress in relation to attainment measures (Webster et al. 2010), but they also show that TAs have some positive impact on children’s behaviour and emotional development (Blatchford et al. 2009b). However, Fletcher-Campbell (2010) and Balshaw (2010) remind us that focusing only on impact on attainment fails to take into full account how the other adult is included, supported, managed and deployed. They suggest that a whole school approach to the utilisation of support staff is a better way to understand the strengths and limitations of the impact of other adults in the classroom.

This paper draws from three studies (Devecchi et al. 2010; Devecchi 2007; Dettori 2009) on teaching assistants (TAs) and higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs) in England and on the deployment of support teachers in Italy respectively to show that, despite different histories and educational systems, the roles and responsibilities of TAs and support teachers are similar with respect to specific local
and classroom conditions; and with respect to their feelings of being treated as second-class members of staff, devoid of status and power to bring about effective support for inclusion. The paper thus calls for further comparative research between different countries so as to learn from each other’s successes and mistakes how to develop appropriate support for both children and adults.

Inclusion and classroom support in Italy and England

While past developments in inclusive practice have been determined by a broad social justice agenda, present and future developments are better located in the close relationship between educational policy and practice addressing economic and budgetary restraints. The ongoing process of readjustment, legitimised by the ‘bare economic necessities’ argument, is complex because the educational and economic discourses at times reinforce each other, while at other times they diverge profoundly. This general analysis is valid for both Italy and England, while of course cultural, economic and education differences persist.

Additionally, at least in England, latest developments have seen a revival of a medical model exemplified by the emphasis on SEN as a ‘within the child’ difficulty. It is noteworthy, for example, that the Green Paper Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability (Department for Education [DfE] 2011), which outlines major changes to the provision for children with SEN, calls for a removal to the ‘bias towards inclusion’ (8). Although not clearly explained, it seems that present policy development confuses the spirit of inclusion with the practice of placing children in mainstream education. While focused on parents’ choice, this state of affairs does not inform how mainstream and/or special schools, and support teachers and staff feel about themselves, their roles and practice. The views of those employed to support children and teachers are tellingly missing from the present debate. In order to contextualise the findings and support our argument, the next sections outline the situation in England and Italy.

Classroom support and inclusion in England

There are 442,700 (full-time equivalent) teachers and 345,900 support staff employed in English schools of whom 151,580 are teaching assistants, inclusive of 16,300 HLTAs (Department for Education [DfE] 2010). This threefold rise since the Labour government came to power in 1997 has been the result of a number of related but also contrasting educational policies. On the one hand, TAs and HLTAs have been employed to meet the agendas of raising standards and pupil attainment, especially in literacy and numeracy, and supporting the social inclusion agenda, that is the inclusion of children with disabilities, but also of those children from disadvantaged backgrounds. On the other hand, the increase served the purpose of restructuring the way teachers work through the remodelling and modernisation of the school workforce. This remodelling agenda redefined job jurisdiction between teachers and their assistants by creating professional overlap between similar roles, such as taking full classes and planning for lessons (Hancock et al. 2010).

To accommodate these changes, the roles and responsibilities of school support staff have evolved, mostly in an organically and ad hoc manner, to include one-to-one SEN support, group work, specific support for literacy or numeracy classes, support for extra-curricular activities, and examination supervisors. In some cases,
TAs and HLTAs are also employed as cover teachers, or as administrative assistants. Research conducted on the employment of HLTAs shows a pattern of high local variability which, and while promoting a flexible approach, it can also result in less than fair contract and employment criteria, and variable quality in the support children receive (Webster et al. 2010). The variability in the quality of support can partly explain why research on the impact they have on children’s learning has so far proven challenging and elusive.

A further problem involves the quality and content of training and professional development offer and the lack of a nationally recognised professional qualification, despite positive improvement in the training offered since the signing of the National Agreement (Department for Education and Skills [DfES] 2003), which defined more clearly competencies between teachers and their assistants. TAs can now access Foundation Degrees and courses for HLTAs, and in some cases, continue to gain a qualified teacher status, or further qualifications to work with children with specific SEN or disabilities, or to work in literacy and numeracy interventions. However, TAs do not necessarily tend to be employed on the basis of their training and qualifications, but on other criteria such as ability to work with children, past experience, and the specific and contingent needs of the school (Devecchi and Rouse 2010).

Whether support staff has or lacks qualifications, their role has been seen as liminal, marginal and subordinate to that of teachers, rather than complementary to it, as Watkinson (2002) and Mansaray (2006) argue. This state of affairs reflects a perceived hierarchical distinction between pedagogical, caring roles, and managerial roles. Yet, as Webster et al. (2010) acknowledge, a discussion about TAs’ pedagogy is more timely than ever as drastic economic cuts will have a bearing on how TAs will be deployed, employed and trained in the future.

Classroom support and inclusion in Italy

Like England, Italy has a long history of developing more inclusive schools which cater for 99.5% of all children with disabilities (Associazione TreeLLe 2011). The first major piece of legislation on the matter was the Law 517/77, which in 1977 decreed that all children, irrespective of their ability and/or disability, had the constitutional right to attend mainstream education. Consequently special schools were closed down and remedial classes abolished. The rights to an education was later restated in the Law 104/92 which established the role of the support teacher with responsibilities for facilitating the social, emotional and educational inclusion of children with disabilities. While it is important to note that in Italy the classification of disability is more stringent than the broad English notion of special educational needs (SEN), in both countries the emphasis has been on multi-agency collaboration between class teachers and specialists from other services.

While the law promotes inclusion, in practice achieving it is fraught with difficulties, one of which is the extent to which classroom teachers feel they are equipped and should be responsible for the teaching of children with SEN. One of the consequences of this situation, which is not dissimilar from that in England, can be a difficult working relationship between the classroom and support teachers. However, unlike in England, in Italy support teachers are qualified teachers who undergo further postgraduate training in pedagogy, didactic psychology, and child neuropsychiatry beyond their initial teacher training. At the heart of the training is,
as Canevaro (2003) suggests, the need for including both theory and practice. Thus, the course includes both lectures delivered by experts from the medical profession, psychologists, teachers, pedagogues and educationalists, and school placements where the students have the opportunity to experience and learn from good inclusive practice. The purpose of the postgraduate course is that of offering support teachers a broad understanding of disability theory, rather than specialisation in discrete disabilities.

The primary role of the support teacher is that of developing an individual educational plan (IEP) for the child in collaboration with the class teacher, a task which in England is the responsibility of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO). Unlike common practice in England, support teachers are not allocated to individual children, but to the class the child attends and thus their remit is that of helping the class teacher to develop and apply modifications and adaptations so as to support the learning of all the children. The support teacher is thus, by law, equally responsible for all children and has, at least in theory, the same authority as the class teacher.

Methodology

Data for this paper draws from one ethnographic study (Devecchi 2007) and a mixed method study of the deployment, employment and impact of HLTAs (Devecchi et al. 2010). The first study utilised surveys, semi-structured interviews with TAs, teachers, and SENCO and classroom observations; while the second study included a survey to HLTAs and school senior management leaders employed in all secondary, primary and special schools in an East Midlands local authority. The survey phase was then followed by semi-structured interviews with HLTAs and members of the senior management team in selected schools.

Dettori’s (2009) research, on the other hand, included 20 semi-structured interviews with support teachers (16 women and 4 men) who had been working in their roles for over five years. The study explored the reasons why so many decide to leave soon after they have acquired the knowledge and experience necessary to play a positive role in ensuring the effective inclusion of children with disabilities. Their ‘flight’ is a problem not only for the children, but also for regular classroom teachers who lack experienced support teachers. Interviews were audiotapes, transcribed and analysed with a view to identify major emergent themes in relation to support teachers’ roles, responsibilities and job satisfaction.

How teachers and TAs view their work: The English case

I think, you sit between the TA and you sit between the teacher. The skills that you offer are obviously not qualified, but it is valued so much that you are doing tasks which would be expected from a qualified teacher. Now that is a double-edged sword. Because some people could say that’s cheap labour. Because, obviously the pay for a teacher is significantly different to the pay for an HLTA. But I have to say that, for example, my employer has responded to that, and they actually pay me as an unqualified teacher. (HLTA)

As the quote above from one HLTA shows, those adults who work more closely with teachers and children inhabit a professional liminal space marked by fluid and
and contentious professional boundaries’. This is reflected by the variety of ways in which TAs and HLTAs support the school, the teachers and the children in the following four main areas:

- facilitating instruction and access to the curriculum by providing differentiation or carrying out intervention programmes;
- supporting the assessment of children and monitoring their progress;
- managing children’s behaviour and attending to their emotional needs;
- carrying out varied administrative tasks.

Furthermore, TAs and HLTAs are variedly utilised to support individual children, within or outside the classroom, or work with small groups. Depending on the school size and way the school sets up its provision, TAs and HLTAs work under the management of the classroom teachers, or the SENCO, or the head teacher, and, at least in theory, they should work under the supervision of the classroom teacher. However, evidence from our studies shows that many might be solely responsible for the education of children with SEN and disabilities.

Because of their para-professional status, HLTAs also plan lessons, carry out assessment of learning in a more independent manner and have management roles with regard to the deployment of other TAs in the school, and, in some cases, they also have secretarial roles mainly in relation to the upkeep of school statistical data on their pupils’ progress. Evidence shows that the utilisation of HLTAs and TAs’ support varies greatly and that this flexibility can impact on both the effectiveness of the support provided and the collaboration between TAs and HLTAs, and teachers. With regard to effective collaboration, evidence from the ethnographic study (Devecchi 2007) shows that this is possible when they:

- Acknowledge each other’s knowledge, skills, and expertise.
- Acknowledge publicly their presence and support in the classroom.
- Discuss pupils’ progress and lesson plans regularly.
- Take each other’s feedback seriously and incorporate it in the lesson plan.

More specifically, teachers supported their TAs by:

- Asking for and valuing TAs’ opinion.
- Sharing lesson plans, and resources.
- Being clear in their exposition and instruction.
- Being consistent with behavioural rules.
- Allowing TAs to move freely in the classroom, thus enabling them to support all children and avoiding specific children being singled out.
- Introducing TAs as members of staff.
- Giving TAs freedom of judgement, responsibility and autonomy.

However, evidence from the study on the employment, deployment and impact of HLTAs paints a rather different picture (Devecchi et al. 2010) since HLTAs suggest that the status of their employment contract are still unsettled:

... there seems to be no standard job description. HLTAs’ responsibilities are at the discretion of the schools’ head teacher.
I wear so many hats.

... so we’re actually floating around on a cloud in the middle of somewhere.

Data from both the questionnaires and interviews give an idea of what ‘hats’ HLTAs have to wear. Both as HLTAs, and as TAs, or in some cases as unqualified teachers – some respondents worked on a split-contract – they were deployed with curricular responsibilities in a number of subjects including English, religious studies, physical education, ICT and science, but also extracurricular responsibilities including lunchtime supervision, after school activities, administrative responsibilities, pastoral care, and specific activities for children with autism, or literacy and numeracy intervention. Almost all HLTAs took whole classes, planned for their lessons and had undergone training, mostly in specialised areas such as behaviour management.

This discrepancy between qualifications and actual working reality, on the one hand, and pay and working conditions, on the other, led many HLTAs to realise that in many respects their work was not acknowledged and thus they were treated unfairly. Therefore, some of the respondents suggested that they would like to:

Be paid at a HLTA rate full time, as role does not change when I go back to being paid as a TA in the afternoons.

I am currently used as a teacher without the rewards, i.e., 75% of a full time post. No paid teachers days. Not paid to attend meetings or staff brief. My results are as a good as any teacher but paid a lesser wage. All this said I love my job but at times this can get me down.

When asked how their situation could be improved, HLTAs and TAs mentioned recognition and respect for the work they do, and for the professional knowledge, expertise and skills they have. More in detail, HLTAs put forward the need for a ‘national agreement to recognise and regulate the use of HLTAs’. This national recognition would, in their words, ‘help self-worth and self-esteem in the workforce rather than feeling a waste of talent and experience’.

In conclusion, the most significant finding is that the great variability of TAs’ and HLTAs’ patterns of employment and deployment can have a negative impact on TAs’ and HLTAs’ self-esteem, job satisfaction and overall sense of fairness and recognition for their work. This raises questions on the role of head teachers and line managers responsibility, but it also raises questions on the effectiveness of the present deployment model, and whether a nationally accredited qualification is necessary.

Support teachers in Italy: being a ‘second class’ teacher

Research conducted in Italy stemmed from an interest on the issue of support teachers’ retention. As Halperin and Ratteree (2003) suggest, teachers’ turnover is a ‘silent crisis’ whose long-term consequence is that of depleting the profession of innovative methodologies and a sustainable workforce. Boyd et al. (2005) also highlight how children with SEN are those who suffer most since it is support teachers who leave the profession in greater numbers and who, according to Olsen and Anderson (2007), tend to ‘shift’ to more administrative and managerial
responsibilities. Generally, research on teachers’ retention shows that the reasons for leaving the profession range from dissatisfaction about the nature of the work, to employment issues, low status, and a sense of professional belonging (Rinke 2008). In Italy, the main problem is that around 30% of support teachers ask for redeployment as main classroom teachers after five years from gaining their qualification (Associazione TreeLLe 2011). This leaves many children with SEN without support while local authorities try to fill vacant positions, or deploy teachers without a specialist qualification, or with qualifications, but minimal experience.

Despite a troublesome start in the 1970s, the support teacher’s role has developed as complementary, and in some cases successfully, to that of the regular classroom teacher. However, the evidence from the study (Dettori 2009), corroborated by more recent studies (Demo et al. 2011; Monteverdi 2011), shows that some working conditions with children, families, teachers, and other professionals are some of the main reasons for leaving the profession. With regard to working with children, support teachers question their professional ability and self-efficacy:

I have some serious problems communicating with the child because he has limited cognitive skills. Sometimes it seems that he understands, and then, the day after, I realise that he does not remember anything and that what I have done was almost useless.

I cannot follow what the child says because he has severe communication and speech difficulties. Only his mother can understand him. I spoke to the speech and language therapist, but he could not help me.

I was responsible for a young girl with severe intellectual disabilities. She shouldn’t have been in mainstream because she could not cope with the lessons. When she lost her patience she went wild. More than once she bit me and kicked me. Once she ran away and the caretaker and I had to look for her in the neighbourhood. I don’t think mainstream is ideal for all children with such severe disabilities. It is hypocrisy. The school is like a parking lot. This is not inclusion; this is forced integration.

I had major difficulties with managing behaviour. I have a child with ADHD who breaks the rules. He is not interested and disrupts the lesson. So I have to take him out.

Similarly, support teachers also identified working with parents as one of the major challenges. This is the case when a child’s failure is blamed on the support teacher’s lack of effort:

I still have nightmares when I remember one father who accused me and told me that I was incompetent because the doctor told him that what I was planning for his child was good for nothing and that the child was not improving.

It is not always easy with the parents. I understand them because they cannot accept that their child has big problems. They say we are too demanding. Sometimes when they argue with us is because they need to let off steam. It is a way to say what they don’t know how to say otherwise. Many times we are the scapegoats.

The comments also outline difficulties in multi-agency collaboration between support teachers and the medical profession:
Working with health professionals was also one of the main reasons of frustration although meetings tend to be rare and only when pursued by the support teachers. The role of doctors is mainly related to the assessment and identification of needs and it does not extend to working with the school to support the child.

Even when professionals are cooperative, multi-agency working is not easy. One respondent adds that:

The doctor who follows my pupil is very good. I have had three meetings with her, but it is not easy to get to meet her. She is really busy because she looks after so many children and she does not have time to see me or my colleague.

Heavy workloads, and limited time seem to play a role in the quality of advice and collaboration support teachers receive:

It is hard to meet frequently with the medical team. It would really be useful but it’s not easy because they change doctors all the time and they are not available or approachable, but when I managed to talk to doctors or speech therapists, well, it has been really useful.

Likewise, support teachers also talk about the challenges they face when working in collaboration with the class teacher:

I have been doing this job for years and with time the relationship with the classroom teachers has steadily improved. There was a time when they wanted me to take the child out of the room so they could work in peace with the rest of the classroom. Now, there is better collaboration. We often work in groups and I support many other pupils, not just those who have been identified. But, to be honest, I have to say that many colleagues prefer if I take the child out.

I still have problems with some of my colleagues. We have a teachers’ meeting and we had a real argument because two teachers complained and said I should stay out, take the child out because his behaviour – he is autistic – disrupts the lesson. Many of my colleagues say that they don’t have time to pay attention to ‘my’ pupil because they have to look after the other pupils in the classroom.

I have tried to work with my colleagues so as not to exclude the pupil with disabilities. I have tried to involve my colleagues with planning for professional development or catch up lessons for the child. Well, it’s not easy... say they don’t have the time because there is so much curriculum to cover.

Contrary to the spirit of the law, support teachers are not seen as part of a team but as specifically designated to teach only the child with disabilities and they do this in isolation and frequently outside the classroom.

Besides relational challenges, support teachers also talk about structural barriers, which prevent them from working with the same pupil every year. It is important to note that in Italy the ministry and the local authorities decide in which school to employ teachers who have not achieved the necessary points to have tenure in one school:

I have been working as a support teacher now for three years, every year it is in a different school. I have never managed to teach in the same school and with the same pupils. It is a big problem because you need continuity to get to know the child and instead every year you have to start from scratch.
This is the first year that I have been working in the same school, before that I have been working with many different students. This is year it has been much easier because I knew the children, the teachers, and I could continue working on what I started.

A general sense of frustration underpins the quotes above; there is also a feeling that support teachers work alone, and, at times, they are forced to work outside the classroom. Although a study (Dettori 2010) of the views of parents and children with SEN showed both to be generally satisfied with the work of support teachers, it is the absence of references to the classroom teacher that is of more concern.

Discussion

Despite differences in training and qualifications, the comparison of the deployment of adults support in the classroom shows that both Italy and England face similar challenges and dilemmas. While in both countries the notion that the inclusion of children with SEN or disabilities is a whole school process in which teachers and their assistants work together in supporting all children in the classroom, in reality practices of exclusion and marginalisation of both adults and children within the classroom still exist. These seem to stem from unclear roles and responsibilities, and unresolved discrepancies in relation to expectations between teachers, support teachers and support staff, but also between school staff and other professionals, or parents.

However, these similarities arise from different contextual conditions, which presents a significant conundrum in relation to how to improve the situation. In England, for example, the differential treatment of TAs might be related to their overall lack of nationally accredited qualifications and subordinate professional position. In Italy, however, the very fact that support teachers are qualified to work with children with special needs, might contribute to regular teachers’ feelings of not having to be responsible for the education of children with SEN. Moreover, since in Italy the figure of the special educational needs coordinator (SENCo), that is a member of the schools staff who is responsible for managing provision for SEN and contributes to the support of the teachers, does not exist, there is no system to support them in their work.

The evidence provided in this paper paints a complex picture about the practice of supporting children with SEN. It challenges the view that providing support either through the deployment of TAs or qualified support teachers is a simple matter of additional resources. The analysis of the interviews with support teachers highlighted the challenges they face in relation to working with children, teachers and other professionals, and also in terms of the training they received. They also show that supporting children with SEN is often done in isolation and that collaboration with the classroom teacher is far from being the norm. The analysis of data from the English studies, likewise, portrays a complex picture in relation to the efficacy and fairness of the employment and deployment of TAs. It shows that the line of professional demarcation between teachers and TAs is at times very faint, and that this can be a cause of resentment.

This discussion will focus on the following themes: status, training, and collaboration with classroom teachers, parents and other professionals.
Status

Support teachers in Italy and TAs and HLTAs in England carry out broadly similar roles whose purpose is that of facilitating the educational and social inclusion of children with SEN. Similarly, there are issues with the acknowledgement of their status, whether para-professional in the case of TAs and HLTAs or professional in the case of support teachers. The consequence of having an unclear status impacts on contractual equity and fairness, but more so on their daily practice of support. With regard to Italy, notwithstanding the apparent ‘equality’ between class teacher and support teacher, there are still situations of poor collaboration and less than positive inclusive practices in which the child is still perceived as a problem who remains the sole responsibility of the support teacher.

In England, issues about status are linked to problems related to how TAs and HLTAs are deployed. In their case, for a variety of reasons including also the effect of the training they received, support staff can be deployed to carry out roles which are more pertinent to those of qualified teachers, while, at least in theory, classroom teachers are responsible for planning and guiding the work of TAs and HLTAs. Despite carrying out para-professional tasks, TAs and HLTAs do not receive a comparable remuneration, they do not have clear career pathways and they often feel generally exploited.

Collaboration with colleagues, teachers, parents and other professionals

For both support teachers and TAs and HLTAs, working in collaboration with colleagues, teachers, parents and other professionals is an important and challenging aspect of their role. However, there are some differences between the two countries. In Italy, by law the collaboration between classroom and support teachers should be between equals. In England, TAs and HLTAs work under the management and supervision of classroom teachers and/or the SENCO. Support teachers are responsible for working directly with professionals and parents, while TAs and HLTAs might or might not have contact with professionals and parents.

Despite the differences, establishing and maintaining effective collaboration is mired with difficulties mainly stemming from a scarcity of resources and lack of time. In the case of TAs and HLTAs, they should be working as part of a wider team of professionals, but they might become solely responsible for a child with SEN by default. For Italian support teachers, it is the lack of classroom teachers’ engagement, which proves to be the main difficulty followed by the absence of a system aimed to support them in their work. Most importantly, it seems that the very measure used to prepare ‘some’ teachers to work with children with SEN, creates a divide between teachers. It reinforces classroom teachers’ view that working with children with SEN is a matter of specialised knowledge which they do not have and are not qualified for.

Conclusion

We acknowledge that the effort to make an international comparison between different educational systems has its limitations. With regard to the evidence reported here, the studies were conducted as separate studies and therefore the focus, research questions and methodologies were not entirely comparable. Yet, despite these differences, there are similarities in how support teachers and TAs work, and
in how they feel about their work. The findings suggest that besides the need to provide meaningful and effective training, there is a more pressing need for ongoing support, and for more effective collaboration. Above all, the findings suggest the need to acknowledge and respect the work of support teachers and TAs as equally valuable members of the classroom.

The effort to compare these two national situations has brought to the fore the difficulties of providing a unified account. More research which seeks to understand how different European countries provide for the inclusion of children with SEN is needed to breach both linguistic and conceptual gaps. In the final analysis, the most important outcome is that sharing different sets of knowledge has identified how different countries can learn from each other to implement better and more effective strategies. For example, in Italy there is no SENCO figure although there are signs that such a professional role is presently under discussion, while in England the SENCO is a well-established albeit not unproblematic figure. Both countries stand to learn much from each other on this aspect. With regard to training, Italian support teachers receive an extended professional training, while there is no nationally accredited qualification for TAs. Once again future research and collaboration can shed light on how both countries can inform each other’s provision for training and professional development.

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