

# What Do I Do Now?

## A Teacher's Guide to Including Students with Disabilities

Michael F. Giangreco

**Teachers who successfully teach students without disabilities have the skills to successfully teach students with disabilities. Here are 10 recommendations to guide you.**

**A**s students with disabilities are increasingly being placed in general education classrooms, teachers are asking many legitimate questions about what to do about their instruction and how to do it. For the past seven years, I've consulted with teachers, administrators, support personnel, and families who are grappling with these concerns. I've also joined with colleagues in conducting 12 research studies at some of these schools. The following suggestions are concrete actions to consider as you pursue success for both students with disabilities and their classmates.

### ***1. Get a Little Help from Your Friends***

No one expects teachers to know all the specialized information about every disability, or to do everything that may be necessary for a student with disabilities.

Thus, in schools where students with disabilities are successful in general education classes, teams usually collaborate on individualized educational programs. Team members often include the student and his or her parents, general educators, special educators, para-educators, and support staff, such as speech and language pathologists, and physical therapists. And don't forget: each classroom includes some 20-30 students who are creative and energetic sources of ideas, inspiration, and assistance.

Although teamwork is crucial, look out for some common problems. When groups become unnecessarily large and schedule too many meetings without clear purposes or outcomes, communication and decision making get complicated and may overwhelm families. Further, a group is not neces-

sarily a team, particularly if each specialist has his or her own goals. The real team shares a single set of goals that team members pursue in a coordinated way.

### ***2. Welcome the Student in Your Classroom***

Welcoming the student with disabilities may seem like a simple thing to do, and it is. But you'd be surprised how often it doesn't happen. It can be devastating for such a student (or any student) to feel as if he or she must earn the right to belong by meeting an arbitrary standard that invariably differs from school to school.

Remember, too, that your students look to you as their primary adult model during the school day. What do you want to model for them about similarities and differences, change, diversity, individuality, and caring?

So when children with disabilities come to your classroom, talk with them, walk with them, encourage them, joke with them, and teach them. By your actions, show all your students that the child with disabilities is an important member of your class and, by extension, of society.

### ***3. Be the Teacher of All the Students***

When a student with disabilities is placed in a general education class, a common practice is for the teacher to function primarily as a host rather than a teacher. Many busy teachers actually embrace this notion because it means someone else is responsible for that student. Many teachers, in fact, think of these students as the responsibility of the special education teacher or para-educator.

Merely hosting a student with disabilities, however, doesn't work



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very well (Giangreco et al. 1992). Inevitably, these other professionals will work with the student, and the “host” will end up knowing very little about the student’s educational program or progress. This perpetuates a lack of responsibility for the student’s education and often places important curricular and instructional decisions in the hands of hardworking, but possibly underqualified, paraprofessionals.

Be flexible, but don’t allow yourself to be relegated to the role of an outsider in your own classroom. Remember that teachers who successfully teach students without disabilities have the skills to successfully teach students with disabilities (Giangreco et al. 1995).

#### ***4. Make Sure Everyone Belongs to the Classroom Community***

How, where, when, and with whom students spend their time is a major determinant of their affiliations and status in the classroom (Stainback and Stainback 1996). Too often, students with disabilities are placed with mainstream students, but take part in different activities and have different schedules from their peers. These

practices inhibit learning with and from classmates, and may contribute to social isolation.

To ensure that students with disabilities are part of what’s happening in class, seat them with their classmates, and at the same kind of desk, not on the fringe of the class.

Make sure, too, that the student participates in the same activities as the rest of the class, even though his or her goals may be different. If the class is writing a journal, the student with a disability should be creating a journal, even if it’s in a nonwritten form. If you assign students homework, assign it to this student at an appropriate level. In like manner, if the class does a science experiment, so should this student. Although individualization and supports may be necessary, the student’s daily schedule should allow ample opportunities to learn, socialize, and work with classmates.

#### ***5. Clarify Shared Expectations with Team Members***

One of the most common sources of anxiety for classroom teachers is not understanding what other team members expect them to teach. “Do I teach this student most of or all of what

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I'm teaching the other students?" Sometimes the answer will be yes, sometimes no. In either case, team members must agree on what the student should learn and who will teach it.

To do this, the team should identify a few of the student's learning priorities, as well as a larger set of learning outcomes as part of a broad educational program. Doing so will clarify which parts of the general curriculum the student will be expected to pursue and may include learning outcomes that are not typically part of the general program.

Many students with disabilities also need supports to participate in class.



Photo courtesy of Michael Giangreco

#### **6. Adapt Activities to the Student's Needs**

When the educational needs of a student with disabilities differ from those of the majority of the class,

## **TEACHERS CAN BECOME BETTER ADVOCATES for their students and themselves by becoming informed consumers of support services.**

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These supports should be distinguished from learning outcomes. If the supports are inadvertently identified as learning outcomes, the educational program may be unnecessarily passive.

Finally, on a one- or two-page program-at-a-glance, summarize the educational program, including, for example, priority learning outcomes, additional learning outcomes, and necessary supports (Giangreco et al. 1993). This concise list will help the team plan and schedule, serve as a reminder of the student's individual needs, and help you communicate those needs to teachers in special areas, such as art, music, and physical education. By clarifying what the team expects the student to learn, you set the stage for a productive school year.

teachers often question the appropriateness of the placement. It's fair to ask, for example, why an 11-year-old functioning at a 2nd grade level is placed in a 6th grade class.

The answer is that such a student can still have a successful educational experience. In fact, many schools are purposely developing multigrade classrooms, where teachers accommodate students with a wide range of abilities.

When a student's needs differ from other members of the class, it is important to have options for including that student in activities with classmates. In some cases, the student requires instructional accommodations to achieve learning outcomes within the same curriculum area as his or her classmates, but at a different level.

The student might need to learn, for example, different vocabulary words, math problems, or science concepts. Or the student may be pursuing learning outcomes from different curriculum areas. For example, during a science activity, the student could be learning communication, literacy, or socialization skills, while the rest of the class focuses on science.

#### **7. Provide Active and Participatory Learning Experiences**

I've heard teachers of students with disabilities say, "He wouldn't get much out of being in that class because the teacher does a lot of lecturing, and uses worksheets and paper-and-pencil tests." My first reaction is, "You're right, that situation doesn't seem to match the students's needs." But then I wonder, Is this educational approach also a mismatch for students without disability labels?

Considering the diversity of learning styles, educators are increasingly questioning whether passive, didactic approaches meet their students' needs. Activity-based learning, on the other hand, is well suited to a wide range of students. The presence of a student with disabilities may simply highlight the need to use more active and participatory approaches, such as individual or cooperative projects and use of art media, drama, experiments, field study, computers, research, educational games, multimedia projects, or choral responding (Thousand et al. 1994). Interesting, motivating activities carry an added bonus—they encourage positive social behaviors, and can diminish behavior problems.

#### **8. Adapt Classroom Arrangements, Materials, and Strategies**

Alternate teaching methods or other adaptations may be necessary. For

example, if a group lecture isn't working, try cooperative groups, computer-assisted instruction, or peer tutoring. Or make your instruction more precise and deliberate.

Adaptations may be as basic as considering a different way for a student to respond if he or she has difficulty speaking or writing, or rearranging the chairs for more proximity to peers or access to competent modeling.

You may also have to adapt materials. A student with visual impairments may need tactile or auditory cues. A student with physical disabilities may require materials that are larger or easier to manipulate. And a student who is easily bored or distracted may do better with materials that are in line with his or her interests.

Rely on the whole team and the class to assist with adaptation ideas.

### 9. Make Sure Support Services Help

Having many support service personnel involved with students can be a help or a hindrance. Ideally, the support staff will be competent and collaborative, making sure that what they do prevents disruptions and negative effects on students' social relationships and educational programs. They will get to know the students and classroom routines, and also understand the teacher's ideas and concerns.

Teachers can become better advocates for their students and themselves by becoming informed consumers of support services. Learn to ask good questions. Be assertive if you are being asked to do something that doesn't make sense to you. Be as explicit as you can be about what type of support you need. Sometimes you may need particular information, materials, or someone to demonstrate a technique. Other times, you may

need someone with whom to exchange ideas or just validate that you are headed in the right direction.

### 10. Evaluate Your Teaching

We commonly judge our teaching by our students' achievements. Although you may evaluate students with disabilities in some of the same ways as you do other students (for example, through written tests, reports, or projects), some students will need alternative assessment, such as portfolios adapted to their needs.

Often it is erroneously assumed that if students get good grades, that will translate into future educational, professional, and personal success.

and increasingly access places and activities that are personally meaningful. The aim is to ensure that our teaching will make a real difference in our students' lives. ■

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## UNFORTUNATELY, FAR TOO MANY GRADUATES with disabilities are plagued by unemployment, despite their glowing school progress reports.

This is a dangerous assumption for any student, but particularly for those with disabilities. Although traditional tests and evaluations may provide certain types of information, they won't predict the impact of your teaching on the student's post-school life. Unfortunately, far too many graduates with disabilities are plagued by unemployment, health problems, loneliness, or isolation—despite their glowing school progress reports.

We need to continually evaluate whether students are applying their achievements to real life, by looking at the effects on their physical and emotional health, personal growth, and positive social relationships; and at their ability to communicate, advocate for themselves, make informed choices, contribute to the community,

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