How Inclusion Can Facilitate Teaching and Learning

Discusses what inclusive education is, what it is not, and seven ways it can provide opportunities for improving education

By Michael F. Giangreco, Diane M. J. Baumgart, and Mary Beth Doyle

Michael,

I'm a fourth-grade "Regular Ed" teacher who was very reluctantly drafted to have a child with severe disabilities in my room. It didn't take me long to be genuinely glad to have Sandy in my class. I *can* support inclusion. But please tell me who is going to watch out for people like me? Who will make sure administrators give us smaller class loads to compensate? Who will keep the curriculum people off my back when I don't cover the already overwhelming amount the state expects us to cover? After all, to properly achieve inclusion my time will now be more pressed than ever. Who will ensure that I receive the time I need to meet with the rest of the team (special educator, physical therapist, occupational therapist, etc.)? Who will watch over us, Mike?

Sue Flynn

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Sue Flynn wrote this note during an inservice workshop that focused on ways to include students with disabilities in general education classrooms and activities. Like many other general education teachers across North America, Sue is willing to give inclusive education a try. She is trying to be proactive in her efforts. At the same time, she recognizes that inclusive education represents a significant personal and professional change that requires reconceptualization of roles and responsibilities, redistribution of resources, and new ways of thinking. For teachers who accept the challenge of including students with a wide range of characteristics, the benefits can extend beyond new opportunities for students with disabilities. Recent studies indicate that providing inclusive educational experiences for students with disabilities can have a positive impact on students without disability labels, in part by providing school personnel with new opportunities to facilitate learning (Ferguson, Meyer, Jeanchild, Juniper, & Zingo, 1992; Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993; Giangreco, Edelman, Cloninger, & Dennis, 1993; Hamre-Nietupski, Hendrickson, Nietupski, & Shokoohi-Yekta, 1993; Helmstetter, Peck, & Giangreco, in press; Salisbury, Palombaro, & Hollywood, 1993).

This article has three primary purposes. First, we seek to clarify some of the confusion regarding inclusive education by noting what it is and discussing what it is not. Second, we describe seven ways inclusive education can provide opportunities for teachers to improve the education they provide for all the students in their class. We conclude by responding to Sue Flynn's letter with ideas about

actions teachers can take to facilitate inclusive education.

What Inclusion Is and Is Not

Some people have been heard to say, "Inclusion isn't new! This is what we used to call 'mainstreaming' or 'integration' in the past; it's the same thing, only now the new jargon is 'inclusion.' " However, there is a substantive difference between these related terms. Historically, *mainstreaming* and *integration* shared a common denominator; in both concepts, the focus was on students with disabilities and efforts to educate them in general education schools and classes. Sometimes, when we as special educators were questioned by concerned general education teachers about the unmet needs of students without disability labels, we politely acknowledged the problems, but reminded people that our job was to work for the benefit of students with identified disabilities. *Inclusive education*, though prompted by the needs of students with disabilities, has been a movement designed to reconstruct classes so that all children representing the range of diversity present in our communities are welcome and provided with an appropriate, meaningful education. Therefore, inclusive education *is* a generic educational access, equity, and quality issue; it is *not* a disability issue.

It has been suggested that inclusive education has at least six basic characteristics (Giangreco, Cloninger, Dennis, & Edelman, 1994):

1. *All* students are welcomed in general education classes in their local schools ("Inclusion for some" is a contradiction in terms).
2. Students are educated together in groups in which the number of those with and without disabilities is proportional to the local population (e.g., 10% to 12% have identified disabilities).
3. Students with varying characteristics and abilities participate in shared educational experiences while pursuing individually appropriate learning outcomes with necessary accommodations and supports.
4. Shared educational experiences take place in settings predominantly frequented by people without disabilities (e.g., general education classroom, community work sites).
5. Educational experiences are designed to enhance individually determined valued life outcomes for students and therefore seek an individualized balance between the academic/functional and social/personal aspects of schooling.
6. Inclusive education exists when each of the previously listed characteristics occurs on an ongoing, daily basis.

Inclusive education is an approach that has the potential to positively influence education for many students when it is pursued in a thoughtful manner by professionals, families, students, and community members working together toward common goals. Inclusion is much more than a place; rather, it represents a set of values (e.g., individualization, interdependence, equity, access, diversity, community) from which educational decisions are made. Inclusive education seeks to build on the diversity of students' characteristics as a strength rather than a liability.

For many students with disabilities, adaptations in curriculum, instruction, or supports are key to successful, active participation. Unfortunately, situations do exist where children with unique needs have been placed in general education classes without adaptations to the curriculum, instruction, or supports necessary for meaningful and appropriate participation. Often, these situations have been inappropriately labeled as "inclusive education." Without appropriate accommodations, students' chances for success are compromised. In other situations, rather than welcoming all children and making individualized adaptations, some schools have created artificial mechanisms requiring students to *earn* their way into general education classes, academically or behaviorally (Kunc, 1992), allowing access only to those whose achievement approximates an arbitrarily determined standard. Whether we are talking about situations where appropriate accommodations are not made, or where students have to earn the right to belong, neither situation is inclusive. Both situations violate the basic tenets of inclusive school communities. However, when inclusion is done well, based on individualized decision making for students, it can be accurately judged on its merits. We suggest that our job as educators is to facilitate quality education within inclusive communities by developing new and effective ways to ensure that the lives of the students we teach will be better as a result of having attended our schools.

Facilitating Teaching and Learning

In the following section, we offer seven ideas that highlight how the opportunities available through inclusive education of students with disabilities can help you become a better teacher to all the students in your class.

Diminished Teacher Isolation. Traditional schools foster teacher isolation by their physical layout, closed-door classrooms, and staffing patterns (e.g., one teacher for 25 to 40 students). The negative effects of professional isolation (e.g., withdrawal, paranoia, high degree of routinization) have been well documented in the professional literature (e.g., Fullan, 1991; Lortie, 1975; Rosenholtz, 1989). The inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms can serve as a catalyst to open classroom doors and change staffing patterns so that teachers can build collaborative alliances with other teachers and support personnel in order to have ongoing opportunities to engage in professional dialogue, problem solving, and various forms of coteaching.

Adults who previously were excluded from general education classrooms (e.g., special educators, therapists, paraeducators) can join together with general educators to teach and learn from each other in the context of the general education classroom, contributing based on personal and professional abilities. For example, special educators might contribute suggestions for instructional adaptations, motivational strategies, or techniques for small-group instruction. General educators might contribute suggestions for curricular sequencing, classroom organization, or techniques for large-group instruction. Such blending of skills and experiences will undoubtedly be individualized based on the people in-

volved with each classroom. Continuous dialogue and problem solving can facilitate the "interactive professionalism" (Fullan, 1991, p. 142) necessary to support students with and without disabilities in inclusive communities, at the same time bringing professional development opportunities to the classroom.

Reflection and Self-Assessment. Inclusive education provides opportunities to reflect on and assess your own beliefs and teaching practices. By welcoming students with disabilities to your class—students whom you may be unaccustomed to teaching—you confront potential differences between your beliefs and existing practices in your classroom. Teachers who have resolved the conflicts between their beliefs and practices by developing an inclusive classroom often have emerged with new insights, teaching ideas, and methods. As one teacher shared, "I can't believe that just last year I thought I had to control all the learning in my classes. Working with Brent showed me how I really hadn't let students take responsibility for their learning." Another teacher explained, "I never would have thought of these teaching lessons or been brave enough to try them if Chase had not been in my classroom." Numerous teachers have told us that the reflection and self-assessment they engaged in because of their involvement in inclusive education have helped them develop a deeper understanding of their own beliefs and rejuvenated their appreciation for collaborating with their colleagues.

"Ownership," Accountability, and Action. A common initial reaction to having a student with disabilities in your classroom is to request that an "expert" (e.g., resource room teacher, special educator, therapist) come into the room to observe, consult, and be available to the student for primary instruction. Many general education teachers have been socialized to believe that experts have some unique knowledge and will know exactly what is best for this particular student. Although support personnel may have some specialized knowledge and offer needed support, teachers have told us that eventually they realized that what they needed was not an expert to tell them what to do, but rather, someone to talk with, share ideas with, solve problems with, and reassure them when they wonder if they expect too much or too little of a student.

"Inclusion is much more than a place; rather, it represents a set of values . . . from which educational decisions are made."

For teachers who nurture an inclusive community of learners, the ownership they feel for their students extends to all the students in the class. They care that what they do affects students in positive ways, and they take actions to promote learning and to account for the progress students make. Rather than having experts tell teachers what to do or pull students out for primary instruction, teachers and support personnel form collaborative teams. They share responsibility for the students, combine their varied skills, and collaborate on teaching methods and expected outcomes. One teacher summarized the issues of ownership, actions, and accountability in this way:

> This is my ninth year of teaching (first grade) and . . . at first I was really nervous. I don't know all the little in's and out's of the IEP . . . and keeping all that kind of data . . . and that is not my favorite thing to do! At the beginning of the year . . . I said, "I'm happy to have her in my room for the socialization or whatever, but I can't promise you that she's going to be able to read at the end of the year and . . . meet all the [IEP goals]." I felt that you are the special education people. It's your job and if you decide that she's really not learning what she needs this year, I trust that you are going to come in here and take her out and teach her that. But, it's fine with me that she is in here.
>
> I feel differently now. I very much feel ownership of Jay and that I am Jay's teacher. She is in my room all day. She's learning quite a bit here and I feel like it ought to be a joint decision with us and her parents if something needs to be changed . . . I guess I feel I have a better feeling for how it should be adapted for her than the special education teacher. I just spend more time with her. (Meyer, Ferguson, & Baumgart, 1992)

Teachers as Role Models. Teachers are role models. We influence what children learn by the ways we act, what we say, and how we say it. This modeling is part of a teacher's job. The presence of a student who has characteristics to which we may be unaccustomed, such as a disability, provides opportunities for modeling important prosocial behaviors. Two behaviors, in particular, are likely to be vital lessons for the foreseeable future. First, inclusive education provides opportunities for teachers to model acceptance of human diversity in its many forms (e.g., culture, race, gender, disability). If we are to encourage the next generation to accept and value diversity, what better opportunity than welcoming students with disabilities into the classroom as full, participating members. The expanding diversity of the student population reflects the corresponding expansion of diversity in our communities, which highlights the need for students to learn how to live, work, and play harmoniously with people who have an ever-widening range of personal characteristics.

Second, teachers have the opportunity to model coping with change. Futurists are continually reminding us that the nature and speed with which change is occurring on a variety of dimensions will undoubtedly continue. The educational inclusion of students with disabilities represents a change for many teachers and students. How do we, as adults, react to this change? How would we want our students to react to such changes? Ongoing opportunities to react constructively to change can send powerful messages to students about how to deal with new situations.

Teacher–Student Collaborations. Inclusive education encourages the development of a community of learners, where everyone teaches and every-

one learns. This reciprocal exchange is different from the more typical approach, in which learning theoretically flows only from the teacher to the students. Although we acknowledged in the previous section that teachers can serve an important function as models of prosocial behavior, teachers involved in inclusion efforts have opportunities to learn from the modeling provided by their students as well. In situations in which a student with disabilities has advanced through the grades with his or her peers, it may be the new teacher who learns from the students. As one teacher explained,

> I started watching my own regular classroom students. They didn't treat him any differently. They went about their business like everything was normal. So I said, "If they can do it, I can do it." He's not getting in their way, they're treating him like everybody else. (Giangreco et al., 1993, p. 366)

Teachers in inclusive classrooms have also recognized that it can feel overwhelming to be responsible for figuring out and implementing the myriad adaptations involved in accommodating a wide range of student needs. Some teachers react to this challenge by letting someone else assume the responsibility, such as a paraprofessional or special educator. Several teachers have told us that this situation eventually leaves them feeling uncomfortable: A student may be physically in the class, yet he or she is not really involved with the group. Others try to take on the stressful task of retaining complete control over figuring out and implementing these adaptations.

An alternative is to create a climate in which general educators and special educators combine their skills and experience to create a classroom atmosphere that encourages students to join the process of solving ongoing curricular and instructional challenges together (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 1994). By giving students an opportunity to participate in the design of their own instruction, teachers dramatically increase the potential number and relevance of ideas generated to solve classroom challenges. In cases where this multidirectional exchange has occurred, teachers have explained how their role as a learner has enlivened their experiences, both personally and professionally (Giangreco et al., 1993).

Considering Related Needs of Other Students. The prospect of inclusion prompts concern when a proposed placement is considered incompatible with student needs because the classroom instruction consists primarily of lecture and paper-and-pencil tasks. People legitimately question whether such a placement will benefit the student with disabilities and may cite the classroom curricula and practices as a rationale for exclusion. If certain practices make the placement undesirable for a student with disabilities, one wonders if those same practices are desirable for students without disability labels. Inclusive precepts have prompted some teachers to ask, "What does the student with disabilities need for learning to be motivating and relevant?" Based on the answers to the aforementioned question, they ask, "Are there other students who could benefit from these same types of curricular or instructional modifications?" Although prompted by a student with a disability, these questions raise issues regarding the educational importance and relevance of teaching strategies for other students. These questions highlight the related needs of students for instruction and can act as a mnemonic to focus on these related needs rather than only on labels based on differences. Classrooms where inclusion has been successful for students with disabilities typically have been successful for students without disability labels as well; these are situations in which all the students in the class learn and feel valued.

Focusing on the related needs of students allows teachers to view all students as sharing common learning needs—needs that require individualization. For example, Chase, a student with a disability, is observed and assessed as needing some group social and language skills; this need becomes apparent when he talks out of turn, repeatedly bumps others sitting next to him, and asks questions unrelated to the topic of the lesson. Although prompted by Chase's behaviors during these large-group discussions, a teacher considering the related needs of classmates might ask if other students have social or language needs that are not being addressed during large-group discussions. The teacher observes that Aneel is shouting out answers, Karli never volunteers to answer, Lizzie and John answer in voices that can rarely be heard, Carrie is fiddling with her shoelaces, and Matt's answers indicate that he has not followed the discussion. The teacher recognizes that many students could use adaptations or support to help them participate in the class, not just Chase. Collaboratively with other team members, the teacher addresses the related needs of these students by extending or modifying the curriculum and instruction. Focusing on related needs offers educators a means to improve education for all the students while avoiding the stigma of focusing on differences.

Active and Participatory Instruction. Teachers involved in inclusive education often recognize that a heavy emphasis on passive, teacher-directed lessons (e.g., lectures) typically is not conducive to meeting the needs of students with disabilities or those without disability labels. These teachers, sometimes with the assistance of their students, design new learning experiences that are much more active and participatory. When students are learning through active participation, the opportunities for adapting participation are abundant. If some students have individualized learning outcomes that are different from those of other classmates, they can pursue multilevel instruction (Collicott, 1991) or curriculum overlapping (Giangreco & Putnam, 1991). Multilevel instruction occurs when a group of students with diverse characteristics pursues individualized learning outcomes from the same curriculum area (e.g., language arts) within a shared activity (e.g., a cooperative group activity). Curriculum overlapping occurs when a group of students with diverse characteristics pursues individualized learning outcomes from different curriculum areas (e.g., science, socialization) within a shared activity (e.g., a lab experiment). Multilevel instruction and curriculum overlapping are not disability concepts, but rather, educational individualization concepts that allow for groups of students with diverse characteristics to work and learn together. These concepts can be applied to meet the individual needs of a student labeled "gifted" as well as one with disabilities.

Future Directions: Taking Action

Dear Sue,

The note you wrote at the inclusive education workshop last fall has been on my office bulletin board ever since. It has been a constant reminder that many teachers continue to have legitimate questions about how inclusive education will play out in their classrooms and schools. Along with my colleagues Diane and Mary Beth, we are writing you this letter because we recognize that although the seven ideas presented in this article address many concerns and issues about inclusive education, they do not address some of the concerns you raised. As you asked, who will "watch out" for the teachers taking on the challenges related to inclusive education (e.g., curriculum, classloads, time to collaborate). We believe our best chance for support is to depend on each other. A good starting point might be to join together with others and address three straightforward questions. What kind of teacher do I want to be? What kind of school do we want? How do we want students' lives to be better as a result of attending our school? The magnitude of the problems facing schools sometimes feels overwhelming. However, the collective efforts made by individuals and small groups who address these three questions can have a powerful impact on students, schools, and communities.

We have learned from the efforts to advance education to include all types of students, that one size does *not* fit all. Inclusive education looks different from place to place, as well it should, depending on the unique characteristics of communities, families, schools, teachers, and students. To guide us all in future efforts, we propose taking four different types of actions.

A colleague of mine, Ann Nevin, once stated that she liked to think about taking action as the four "Ps": *personal, political, professional,* and *practice* (see Giangreco, 1992). *Personal actions* are designed to expand your personal boundaries by seeking out opportunities and creating experiences to interact on a personal level with people who have a range of individual differences (e.g., disability, race, culture, age, socio-economic level, religion, sexual orientation). Acknowledging differences and celebrating the diversity it brings to our communities, hopefully, will help us recognize that individualized accommodations to the educational program can be based on shared or universal needs rather than stigmatized as "special" based on difference.

Political actions refer to becoming involved in organizations and systems that hold the potential to create positive change in our schools and communities. These systems may be local, regional, or national. They may be formal and established or informal and newly formed. Regardless of whether it is making your views and questions known at a local school board meeting, contacting your representatives in Congress, or ensuring that the new playground being planned for the town park is accessible to all the children in the community, political action can influence opinions and outcomes.

Professional actions refer to our responsibilities as professionals to be cognizant of current trends, research, and literature in education as well as from sources outside education that are likely to have an impact on learning, communities, and schools. This can be as simple as reading about current events and/or professional journals and newsletters. It can mean taking the time to talk to people about the work they are doing and seeking to understand the connections to your own work with students. It can mean attending workshops or conferences that offer information related to current trends in education as well as other related topics. Conferences that provide opportunities for a cross-fertilization of diverse ideas and attract participants from many walks of life can be especially valuable. Professional actions can include other options such as visiting or hosting people to exchange professional knowledge and experiences or contributing to the professional database by writing something with a colleague for one of your own associations' publications, presenting a workshop, facilitating a dialogue among people with varying views, or engaging in a professional mentorship.

As you *practice* your personal, political, and professional actions new opportunities are created for learning, growth, and understanding. We realize that some of these actions involve risk, but also that the example you set through your own actions holds the potential to inspire others to act. It's almost like that bumper sticker seen around town, "If the people lead, the leaders will follow." Sue, we realize that you already

engage in many of these actions. We hope that by putting them into the four "Ps" framework, we have given you both a glimpse of all you *already* do and a glimpse of what you can do collectively with others.

We look forward to continuing the dialogue,

Mike, Diane, and Mary Beth

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