



# Moving toward Inclusive Education

by Michael F. Giangreco

In the early 1980s, when I first heard about efforts to include students with moderate and severe disabilities within general education classrooms, I must admit I was somewhat skeptical. I wondered how the educational needs of the students in my own special education class, who had labels such as autism, deaf-blindness, severe mental retardation, and multiple disabilities, could be appropriately addressed within a general education classroom. I knew it wouldn't be enough merely to have students physically present in a classroom, separated within the class, or programatically isolated from their peers.

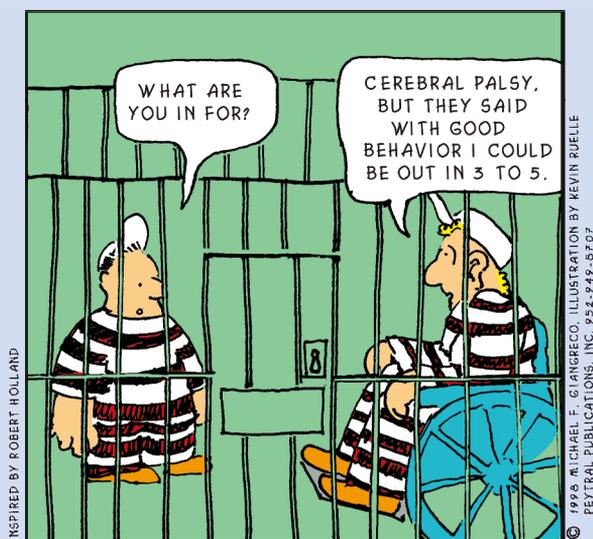
Over the next few years I had opportunities to help develop inclusive educational opportunities for students with disabilities by working collaboratively with other team members (e.g., parents, general educators, related services staff, paraprofessionals). Despite the initial apprehensions of some school staff, once people got to know their new student with disabilities and designed appropriately individualized curriculum and instruction, they usually felt positive about the situation. Equally as important, many teachers came to realize that the steps they had taken to ensure educational integrity and appropriate inclusion of the student with disabilities (e.g., collaborative teamwork, activity-based learning, cooperative experiences, data-based instruction, creative problem solving, peer-to-peer supports) were also applicable for meeting the widely differing educational needs of students without disability labels. Qualified general education teachers with inclusive attitudes and appropriate supports found that they could successfully teach students with disabilities, in part because the basic principles of teaching and learning are the same whether a student has a disability label or not.

In recent years the term *inclusive education* has been a source of some controversy. Sometimes people's concerns about inclusive education are based on speculation rather than actual experiences with inclusion. Other times their concerns are less about inclusion than about the process of change. Often they had been exposed to something labeled "inclusive education" when it wasn't. Some of these well-intentioned but mislabeled situations were only partial im-

plementation efforts. Too often they were simply examples of bad educational practice. As my colleague, Michael Hock, likes to say about inclusive education, "Doing it wrong doesn't make it wrong." So when someone tells me a horror story about a student with a disability who was dumped into a classroom, or how the teacher wasn't supported, or how a student's needs weren't met, I remind them that such situations are inaccurately labeled as inclusive education.

Inclusive education means:

1. All students are welcomed in general education classes in their local schools. Therefore, the general education classroom in the school that a student would attend if he did not have a disability is the first placement consideration, given individually appropriate supports and services.



### "PAROLE APPROACH" TO SCHOOL INCLUSION

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2. Students are educated in classes where the number of those with and without disabilities is proportional to the local population (e.g., 10% to 12% have identified disabilities).
3. Students are educated with peers in the same age groupings available to those without disability labels.
4. Students with varying characteristics and abilities participate in shared educational experiences while pursuing individually appropriate learning outcomes with necessary supports and accommodations. In cases where students have substantially different learning outcomes, this can occur through differentiated instruction, multi-level instruction, or curriculum overlapping.
5. Shared educational experiences take place in settings predominantly frequented by people without disabilities (e.g., general education classroom, community worksites).
6. 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.
7. Inclusive education exists when each of the previously listed characteristics occurs on an ongoing daily basis.

At its core, inclusive education is a set of values, principles, and practices that seeks more effective and meaningful education for all students, regardless of whether they have exceptionality labels or not.

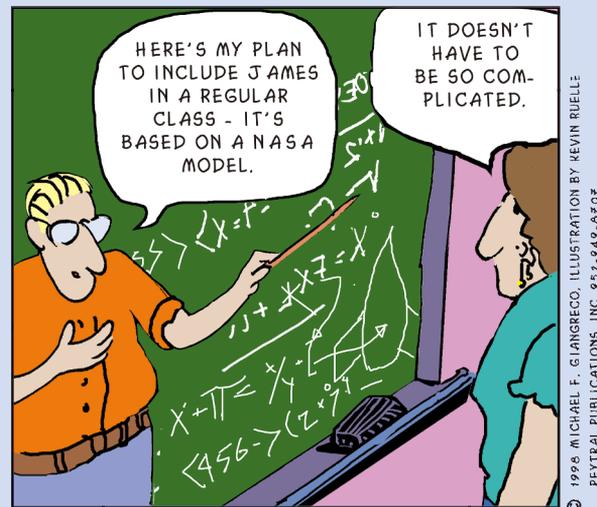
People occasionally ask me, “Are there any students who cannot successfully be included in general education?” If you are looking for the rare exception, it can usually be found. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that where such exceptions exist it is usually because we, as a field, have not yet figured out how to include certain students or have chosen not to. The exclusion of many students with disabilities often has less to do with their characteristics than ours. For example, 20 years ago it was quite rare for students with Down syndrome to be educated in general education classrooms. Today in many school districts it is commonplace. The range of characteristics presented by students with Down syndrome are the same now as they were then. What has changed are our attitudes and practices. But clearly more needs to be done.

Our attention and energy may be more constructively focused on asking questions such as “How can we successfully include more students with disabilities who are still being educated in unnecessarily restrictive environments such as special education schools and classes?” We know that far too many students are unnecessarily excluded because children with similar characteristics and

needs who live in one community are educated in general education classes with supports while in other communities they continue to be sent to special education classes and schools, often without any real consideration being given to general class placement. Being included should not depend on where you live, but currently it does. We need to continually remind ourselves that special education—namely, specially and individually designed instruction—is a portable service, not a place.

We have moved beyond knowing whether inclusive education is viable; it has been demonstrated to be so for an ever widening array of students in increasing numbers of schools over many years. As this change progresses, it will require a continued shift in how we think about educating diverse groups of students and how schools operate. Students’ lives should be better as result of having been in school. Inclusive education provides a foundation for that to occur for students with disabilities in ways that are not possible in special education schools and classes. Ultimately, this job will be easier, approached with greater enthusiasm, and maybe even with a greater sense of urgency, when we demonstrate that we truly value people with disabilities by including them, welcoming them, and helping them learn skills and develop supports that result in meaningful outcomes in their lives.

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**FRANK LEARNS THAT INCLUSION DOESN'T HAVE TO BE ROCKET SCIENCE.**

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