

University of Vermont

ScholarWorks @ UVM

College of Education and Social Services
Faculty Publications

College of Education and Social Services

2007

Including students with disabilities in the classroom

Michael Giangreco

michael.giangreco@uvm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/cessfac>



Part of the [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Giangreco, M. F. (2007). Including students with disabilities in the classroom. In M. F. Giangreco & M. B. Doyle (Eds.) *Quick-Guides to Inclusion: Ideas for educating students with disabilities* (2nd ed., pp. 1-14). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

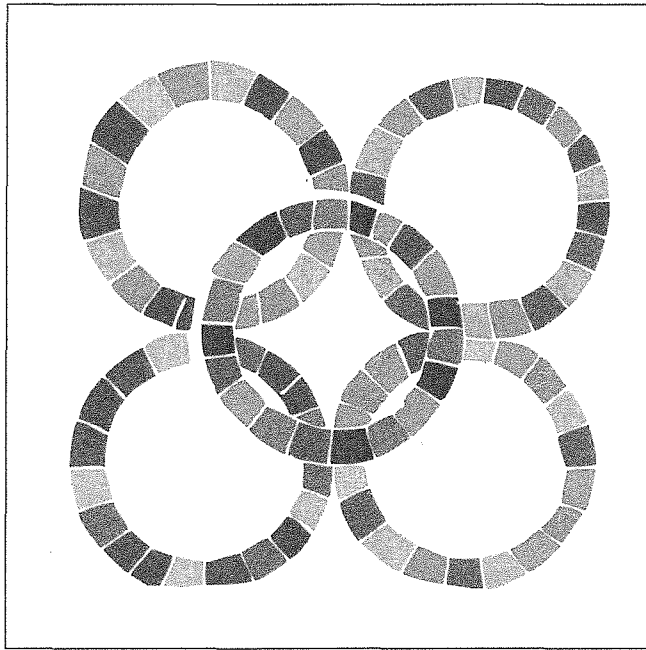
This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education and Social Services at ScholarWorks @ UVM. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Education and Social Services Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UVM. For more information, please contact donna.omalley@uvm.edu.

Giangreco, M. F. (2007). Including students with disabilities in the classroom. In M. F. Giangreco & M. B. Doyle (Eds.) *Quick-Guides to Inclusion: Ideas for educating students with disabilities* (2nd ed., pp. 1-14). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Quick-Guide #1

Including Students with Disabilities in the Classroom

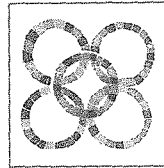
Michael F. Giangreco



Quick-Guides to Inclusion **Ideas for Educating Students with Disabilities, Second Edition**

Michael F. Giangreco & Mary Beth Doyle
Editors

Quick-Guides to Inclusion: Ideas for Educating Students with Disabilities (2nd ed.) © Michael F. Giangreco, 2007
Available through Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., Baltimore, 1-800-638-3775



Dear Teacher,

You just found out that a student with disabilities is being placed in your classroom. For some of you, this is an experience you've had before—although maybe this new student presents unique challenges and opportunities. For others, this may be a first-time experience. Regardless, I understand that you have lots of questions about what is expected of you, what to do, and how to do it. Hopefully, some of your questions will be answered in the following pages.

As you already know, there are countless resources to choose from to learn more about teaching a student with disabilities, but rumor has it you simply don't have time to read them all. Don't worry! My guess is that you probably already know much of what you need to for this to be a successful experience for you and your class. A big part of successful inclusion is a matter of applying the knowledge and skills you already possess to a new situation. Other teachers have done this successfully, and you can do it too! Most of what you need to do requires common sense—this isn't rocket science, but it is important!

This Quick-Guide is designed to give you succinct information about some of the most important guidelines for successfully including students with disabilities in your classroom. These guidelines are, of course, most effective when individualized in a thoughtful manner to match your own situation. I've listed 10 guidelines, each of which is followed by a brief explanation. Obviously, there is much more to learn than is presented in this short resource, so at the end of the Quick-Guide you'll find a list of "Selected References." In the meantime, this Quick-Guide will help get you started.

Good Luck!
Michael



GUIDELINES-AT-A-GLANCE

1. Get a Little Help from Your Friends
2. Welcome the Student in Your Classroom
3. Be the Teacher for All Your Students
4. Establish a Classroom Community
5. Develop Shared Educational Program Expectations
6. Have Options for Including Students
7. Make Learning Active and Participatory
8. Adapt Classroom Strategies and Materials
9. Make Sure Support Services Are Really Helping
10. Evaluate the Effectiveness of Your Teaching



Get a Little Help from Your Friends

There's lots to do, but no one expects you to do it all by yourself. Similarly, no one expects you to know all the specialized information that might accompany a student with disabilities. Luckily, you're not alone. Schools where students with disabilities are taught in general education classes develop teams to help plan and implement students' individualized education programs. Members always include you as the teacher, along with the student's parents, special education teacher, and the student when appropriate.

Depending upon a student's needs, teams sometimes include other members, such as a speech/language pathologist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, school psychologist, counselor, or possibly a paraprofessional. But make no mistake about it, general education teachers have much to contribute to the educational team for a student with a disability! Your knowledge of the general education curriculum and instructional methods, along with your teaching experiences, are critical team resources.

Although collaborative teamwork is a crucial element of quality education for students with disabilities, be on the lookout for good ideas run amuck. Just because a group of adults is assigned to the same student doesn't mean they are a team. Groups sometimes become unnecessarily large and unwieldy or have too many meetings without a clear purpose and outcome. These problems can complicate communication and decision making among team members, overwhelm families, and inhibit constructive action. For example, it's problematic if team members agree that each of the professional disciplines will have their own separate goals corresponding with their respective disciplines. Although members may reach consensus, a desirable action, the positive aspects are canceled out when the consensus is reached to pursue different goals—this is pseudo-teamwork. In contrast, a real team shares a single set of educational goals that belong to the student rather than any particular discipline. Members collectively pursue the student's goals in a coordinated manner based on a shared vision of the student's future.

The adult members of your team won't necessarily be present all the time to help you. So don't overlook the energetic people who are in your room all the time. Your students offer a ready supply of ideas, inspiration, and assistance—they can be your greatest resource if you create an environment that welcomes their contributions.



Welcome the Student in Your Classroom

Welcoming a student with disabilities in your classroom may seem like a simple thing to do—and it is—but you might be surprised how frequently it doesn't happen. A common, yet devastating, experience for students with disabilities and their families is getting a message that the student is not welcome in the school or must "earn" the right to belong.

It can be a difficult and unpleasant experience for students with disabilities and families to be actively or passively rejected by school personnel. We know such exclusion wouldn't be acceptable based on other diversity characteristics (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status), yet for some reason people still feel justified excluding students based on disability. Invariably, arbitrary standards and criteria for inclusion differ from school to school and state to state. You can find two students with nearly identical characteristics, but in one school the student is placed in a regular class full time, and in another school the student is placed in a special class. This tells me that placement can be more about the characteristics of the school and its personnel than it is about the characteristics of students with disabilities.

Beyond the effects on the student and family, what kind of message does your reaction to a student with disabilities send to students and colleagues? As the classroom teacher, the students in your class look to you as their primary adult model during the school day. What do you want to model for your students about similarities and differences, change, diversity, individuality, and caring? Whatever actions you choose to take or not take in terms of welcoming all your students can have powerful implications concerning their school experience and learning.

There is no avoiding the fact that your colleagues at school will be watching too. My own experience is that, more often than not, it is the adults who have difficulties accepting students with disabilities more so than the students. By providing a welcoming and accepting environment for all the students who live in our communities, a new generation is emerging who are more likely to have friends with disabilities in their classrooms and neighborhoods as a typical part of daily life.

So when a child with a disability comes to your classroom, welcome her as you would any other student. Talk to her, walk with her, encourage her, joke with her, involve her, and teach her. Let her know through your ongoing actions that she is an important member of your class.



Be the Teacher for All Your Students

When a student with disabilities is placed in a general education class, a common misunderstanding is that you, as the classroom teacher, are primarily a host rather than a teacher. Many teachers welcome this notion with open arms. It means someone else is responsible for actually teaching the student with disabilities. This makes sense to many teachers who already feel they have too much to do and wonder if they have the skills to be successful with their students who have disabilities. There's just one catch: merely hosting doesn't work very well.

When the teacher serves as host, it's someone else, such as a paraprofessional, special educator, or another support person, who takes turns working with the student who has a disability in the back of the classroom or in a different room. The teacher ends up having minimal or superficial interactions with this student and not having a good handle on what is going on with him or her educationally. This does not sit well with many teachers because they want to, and should, be in charge of activities and people in their classroom.

Yet some teachers say they don't really think of the student with disabilities as one of *their* students. I've heard teachers say, "I have 26 students plus John [a student with disabilities]. My job is to teach my 26 students and Karen's job [paraprofessional] is to teach John." This "hosting" approach perpetuates a lack of ownership and responsibility for the student's education, and too often it leaves major curricular and instructional decisions to hard-working but potentially underqualified paraprofessionals.

Although your student with disabilities should expect to receive individually determined special education supports, I strongly encourage you to really be the teacher for all the students who are placed in your class. That means knowing what all your students are learning and personally spending time teaching each of them, including your students with disabilities.

Be flexible, but don't allow yourself to be relegated to being an outsider in your own classroom. You are successful teaching students without disabilities; that means you have the core set of knowledge and skills to be successful teaching students with disabilities. Teachers who have embraced the challenge of teaching their students with disabilities often report that they have learned approaches that benefit their entire class and that they keep using after the student with a disability has moved on to the next grade.



Establish a Classroom Community

In conjunction with welcoming the student with disability in your classroom and establishing yourself as the teacher, it's important to have the student be a valued member of the classroom community. Where students spend time, what they do, when, and with whom, play major roles in defining affiliation and status within the classroom. Too many students with disabilities are "placed" in the general education class, but are not included much of the time or in ways that are perceived as important by their classmates. Some students with disabilities spend a significant amount of time separated from their classmates, do different activities, and have a different daily schedule than their peers. These experiences inhibit learning with and from peers, contribute to social isolation, and result in missing out on valuable peer-to-peer learning. When teachers create favorable environments for learning together, it's amazing how much students can learn from their classmates, regardless of disability or other labels.

It is all too common to find the student with a disability seated on the fringe of the class. Make sure this student has the same kind of desk as classmates (or as similar as possible) and is seated with them rather than apart from them. Students with disabilities have to be physically present to be part of what's happening. If the desks are arranged in groups of four, make sure the student with a disability is in a group with three other students who do not have disabilities. In other words, don't group all the students who have special needs together. Of course, location and presence in the classroom is just a starting point.

Make sure that the student with disabilities participates in the same activities as his classmates as much as possible, even though the student's goals may differ than those of other classmates. If everyone in the class writes in a journal, so should this student, even if it requires adaptation to a non-written form. If all the students do homework, so should this student, at an appropriate level in terms of amount and difficulty. If the class is doing a science experiment, the student with a disability should be involved, even though in some cases the student's targeted learning outcomes within the science experiment activity may be different than those of classmates (e.g., literacy, following directions, taking turns). Although individualization may be necessary, the student's daily schedule should allow ample opportunities to learn, socialize, play, hang out, and work with the rest of the class.



Develop Shared Educational Program Expectations

One of the most common sources of anxiety for classroom teachers is understanding what others, such as parents, administrators, and special educators, expect them to teach: “Do you expect me to teach this student most or all of what the other students without disabilities are learning?” Sometimes the answer will be “Yes,” sometimes “No.” A crucial step is to make sure that team members share common expectations about what the student should learn in the class and who will be doing the teaching.

Start by having the team identify a small set of the student’s highest priority learning outcomes. Next, have the team agree on a larger set of additional learning outcomes that reflect a broad-based educational program. These additional learning outcomes should clarify what parts of the general education curriculum the student will be expected to pursue and may include learning outcomes that are not typically part of the general program. For example, some students with more severe disabilities may need to learn skills, such as early communication, social, or self-care skills, that most students are assumed to have mastered before entering school. These foundational skills may not be part of the general education curriculum at any level, but still may be appropriate for some students with disabilities to pursue.

Many students with disabilities also need to be provided with supports that allow for their active participation in class. These supports should be identified and distinguished from learning outcomes. When supports (e.g., repositioning a student with physical disabilities, providing tactile materials for a child who is blind) are inadvertently confused with learning outcomes (e.g., goals, objectives) it can lead to an unnecessarily passive educational program for the student with disabilities and will interfere with tapping his/her learning potential.

It can be helpful to summarize the educational program: 1) priority learning outcomes, 2) additional learning outcomes, and 3) supports, on a one- or two-page “Program-at-a-Glance.” This type of concise listing of learning outcomes and supports can assist in planning and scheduling, serve as a helpful reminder of the student’s individualized needs, and provide an effective way to communicate student needs to special area teachers such as art, music, and physical education teachers. By clarifying what the team expects the student to learn, the stage is set for a productive school year.



Have Options for Including Students

When the educational needs (e.g., goals and objectives) of a student with disabilities differ from those of the majority of the class, it is not uncommon for teachers to question the appropriateness of the placement. “Why is the student being placed in my sixth-grade class when she is functioning at a much earlier level?” A student with a disability doesn't have to be at grade level to have a successful educational experience in any particular grade. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 doesn't require that students with disabilities function at the same level as their age peers in order to be included. Rather, IDEA 2004 allows for students to be included in regular education classes as long as their educational needs can be met, given supplemental supports and aids, regardless of their disability labels, severity of disability, or functioning level. Some schools are intentionally utilizing multi-grade classrooms where teachers successfully accommodate students with a wide range of abilities in the same class.

It is important to have options for including a student with disabilities in class activities when some or many of the student's educational needs differ from those of other class members. The easiest option exists when the learning outcomes for the student with disabilities are the same as those for the rest of the class. In such cases, the student may or may not require instructional accommodations or other supports to successfully participate in class activities.

A second option exists when the student participates in class activities while pursuing learning outcomes in the same curriculum area as the rest of the class but at a different level, such as different vocabulary words, math problems, or science concepts. These differences can be in content or amount.

A third option exists when the student with disabilities participates in class activities while pursuing individually determined learning outcomes from different curriculum areas than the rest of the class. For example, the student could be learning communication, literacy, or social skills in a science activity where the rest of the students have science learning outcomes. There also may be rare occasions when the student with a disability requires an alternative learning experience that is not part of a class activity. However, when the classroom teacher differentiates instruction according to content, process, or product, it increases the likelihood that all students can meaningfully participate in class activities.



Make Learning Active and Participatory

I've heard teachers say, "A student with disabilities wouldn't get a lot out of being in that class, because the teacher does a lot of large-group lectures, worksheets, and paper-and-pencil tests." My first reaction is, "You're right, it doesn't sound like that situation matches the needs of the student with disabilities." This leaves me wondering how many students who don't have disability labels would find this kind of educational situation a mismatch. Given the diversity of learning styles among students, educators are increasingly questioning whether class lessons that are too frequently large-group, passive, and didactic really meet the needs of very many students.

Activity-based learning is well suited to including learners with a wide range of educational needs and learning styles. One of the gifts that students with disabilities can bring to the classroom is to highlight the need to use more active, participatory, creative approaches to learning. In the process of increasing the amount of activity and participation to accommodate the needs of a student with disabilities, teachers often realize that these approaches are motivating, preferred, and effective for many other students in the class who don't have disability labels.

Although active and participatory approaches typically require a bit more preparation time, they are more enjoyable for students and teachers alike. I've spoken to several teachers who have told me that their teaching has been invigorated because of what they have learned from having a student with a disability in their class.

Increasing activity and participation can include a wide range of options, such as individual or cooperative projects, drama, experiments, field study, art media, computers, research, educational games, multimedia, various forms of choral responding, and many others. Exemplary practices in general education are often highly compatible with the inclusion of students with disabilities, because such approaches stress active engagement and individualization.

Making sure students have a lot of interesting and motivating work to do can have side benefits, such as decreasing behavior problems and encouraging positive social behaviors. Problems often arise when students are bored or otherwise disinterested or disengaged. Your students can be very creative and helpful in designing active learning experiences, so don't hesitate to include them in the planning process.



Adapt Classroom Strategies and Materials

When placing students with disabilities in general education classes, it is important to ensure that the instruction they receive is effective in meeting their individual needs. Often, when teaching students with disabilities, we need to be more precise and deliberate in how we teach. Even if the content of instruction is meaningful and at an appropriate level of difficulty, it's not enough; we still have to provide effective instruction.

Providing effective instruction to students with disabilities, within large groups, in small groups, or individually, often requires that instruction be adapted. This can mean adapting the instructional arrangement to facilitate learning opportunities, proximity to peers, or access to competent modeling. Sometimes the adaptation can be as basic as considering a different way for a student to respond if he has difficulty using typical modes like speaking or writing. Sometimes it means adjusting the length of the activity or the amount of content the student is expected to complete.

Adapting teaching methods should also be considered. For example, if group lecture doesn't seem to be working, consider alternatives (e.g., smaller cooperative groups, computer-assisted instruction, guided practice, peer-assisted instruction). More specific instructional procedures may also need to be used, such as extending wait time, using both positive and negative examples to illustrate a concept, or offering memory aids.

Materials can also be adapted to match the student's characteristics or interests. For example, adding tactile or auditory cues for a student with visual impairments, making something bigger or easier to manipulate for a student with physical disabilities, or accounting for a student's interests when adapting materials may increase the motivation of a student who is easily bored or distracted.

Rely on the whole team and class to assist with adaptation ideas; this provides opportunities for teachers and students to put their creativity into action. Don't forget to ask the most important person: the student in need of support. Sometimes we learn that supports designed to help a student may be stigmatizing or unwanted (e.g., individual paraprofessional support in the classroom). Students with disabilities often can provide keen insight into their instructional needs if we ask and then listen.



Make Sure Support Services Are Really Helping

It is important to find out what types of support personnel are available to assist students with disabilities in your class. While you are undoubtedly familiar with how to access many commonly available support services (e.g., your school's educational support team, speech-language pathologist, school counselor, school psychologist), the special education teacher in your school may be knowledgeable about other, individually determined support personnel (e.g., occupational therapist, physical therapist, teacher of the blind and visually impaired, teacher of the deaf and hearing impaired, assistive technology specialist, augmentative communication specialist, orientation and mobility specialist, vocational rehabilitation specialist).

Having support service personnel involved in your classroom should be helpful, though it can inadvertently be a hindrance. Often it comes down to how individuals work with you to support the class. In the best-case scenarios, you will work with support personnel who are collaborative and understand the context of your classroom. These folks will ensure that what they do helps you teach your students more effectively, by getting to know your students and the routines of your classroom. They will seek to understand your ideas and concerns.

In other words, effective support personnel won't have a separate agenda. Their collaboration with you will be designed to: 1) account for components of the student's educational program your team previously determined, 2) favorably influence students' social relationships, and 3) minimize potential disruptions to your classroom and the student's schedule. Refer to Quick-Guide 18 for more information about getting the most out of support services.

You can advocate for yourself and your students by becoming an informed consumer of support services. Learn to ask good questions. Be assertive if you feel you are being asked to do something that doesn't make sense to you. Be as explicit as you can about what type of support you need. Sometimes you may need specific information or materials, or someone to demonstrate a technique. At other times, the need may be for someone with whom you can exchange ideas or just get some validation that you are headed in the right direction. When you are on the receiving end of appropriately provided support services, you will feel like you have been helped, because you have been.



Evaluate the Effectiveness of Your Teaching

Evaluating the effectiveness of our own teaching is important for adjusting and improving future instruction and to determine whether the outcomes of our collective efforts have made a difference for the student. To determine the extent and quality of learning, the team initially must have done a good job of determining important learning outcomes and stating them as observable, measurable, goals and objectives at appropriate levels of difficulty. Although evaluation for students with disabilities may take some of the same forms as it does for other students (e.g., written tests, reports, projects), some students with disabilities will need alternative testing accommodations (e.g., more time to complete a test or assignment, having directions read, use of a computer or scribe).

In other cases, data collection must be individualized and precise, such as counting the frequency with which a certain behavior occurs, recording the number of correct steps in a task sequence, or applying gradations in the prompting levels required for a student to respond successfully. Additionally, portfolio assessments can be adapted for use with students with disabilities. For example, some portfolios may include digital photos or videos of a student demonstrating newly acquired skills or the application of skills under new circumstances (e.g., across settings, people).

Often we assume that if students without disabilities get good grades or score well on whatever measures we have created, this will translate into future life success in education, employment, and opportunities. Unfortunately, we have far too many graduates with disabilities whose postschool lives are marked by unemployment, health problems, loneliness, inadequate recreational opportunities, and isolation from community life—despite the fact that their school progress reports were glowing.

Therefore, we need to continually evaluate whether a student's achievement is being applied to real life, as evidenced by outcomes such as physical and emotional health; positive social relationships; and the ability to communicate, self-advocate, make informed choices, demonstrate personal growth, and increasingly access places and activities that are personally meaningful. In so doing, we can strive to ensure that our teaching will really make a positive difference in our students' lives. We need to keep asking ourselves whether our teaching is making a real difference in student's lives.

Selected References

- Bauer, A.M., & Brown, G.M. (2001). *Adolescents and inclusion: Transforming secondary schools*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Downing, J. (2002). *Including students with severe and multiple disabilities in typical classrooms: Practical strategies for teachers (2nd ed.)*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Giangreco, M.F., Dennis, R., Cloninger, C., Edelman, S., & Schattman, R. (1993). "I've counted Jon:" Transformational experiences of teachers educating students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children, 59*, 359–372.
- Harmin, M. (1994). *Inspiring active learning: A handbook for teachers*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, PL 108-446, 20 U.S.C. §§ 1400 *et seq.*
- Jorgensen, C.M., Schuh, M.C., & Nisbet, J. (2006). *The inclusion facilitator's guide*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Kennedy, C.H., & Fisher, D. (2001). *Inclusive middle schools*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Kennedy, C.H., & Horn, E.M. (2004). *Including students with severe disabilities*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon/Pearson Education.
- McGregor, G., & Volgelsberg, R.T. (1998). *Inclusive schooling practices: Pedagogical and research foundations: A synthesis of the literature that informs best practices about inclusive schooling*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Ryndak, D.L., & Fisher, D. (Eds.). (2003). *The foundations of inclusive education: A compendium of articles on effective strategies to achieve inclusive education*. Baltimore: TASH.
- Snell, M.E., & Janney, R. (2005). *Collaborative teaming: Teachers' guides to inclusive practices (2nd ed.)*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Thousand, J.S., Villa, R.A., & Nevin, A.I. (2002). *Creativity and collaborative learning: The practical guide to empowering students, teachers, and families (2nd ed.)*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Villa, R.A., & Thousand, J.S. (Eds.). (2005). *Creating an inclusive school (2nd ed.)*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.