



The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 8, Episode 3

Why I Call Myself An Inclusionist

Tim Villegas (00:00):

Hello and welcome to season eight, episode three of the Think Inclusive podcast presented by MCIE. I'm your host, Tim Villegas. And I am literally recording in my closet. And the only reason I'm doing that today is because there is a very noisy dog that's barking in my neighborhood. And I would rather not try to figure out how to edit that out. The other thing that's new about this particular podcast is this is going to be my first solo podcast, which means that there's no guests. And it's just me talking. So if you don't like that, and you know, you would rather listen to guests, we have, you know, a lot of different episodes that you can listen to, but hopefully you listened to the podcast, partly because, you know, you like to hear what I have to think about things and especially about inclusion and inclusive education. So thank you for indulging me and listening to me. I really appreciate that. And hopefully if this is received well, we can do more of this. The Think inclusive podcast, features conversations and commentary with thought leaders in inclusive education and community advocacy, and sometimes solo podcasts by Tim. Think Inclusive exists to build bridges between parents, educators, and disability rights advocates to promote inclusion for all students. That's right, y'all. All means all. And to find out about who we are and what we do visit thinkinclusive.us. It's the official blog of MCIE. And check out our Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter feeds.

Tim Villegas (01:57):

Before I get into what I want to talk to you about today, I want to tell you about our Patreon page. So go to patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast and become a patron of the podcast. When you do, you can get access to patron-only posts, unedited interviews, and there's a lot more. There's three levels. We have the inclusionist level, the advocate level, and the activist level. Help us reach our goal to reach 50 patrons. And once we do, we're going to produce an additional podcast episode per month, only for our patrons. And it might end up being something like this, where it is a solo podcast and I'm you know, sharing my thoughts and opinions or doing some research. So hopefully that's something that you would be interested in. Visit patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast. And thank you for helping us equip more people that promote and sustain inclusive education. So stick around and after the break, I will talk about my road to becoming an inclusionist and share a few more thoughts that are on my mind. Thanks for listening.

Tim Villegas (03:24):

How do you know you're an inclusionist? In 1997, Ellen Brantlinger from Indiana University first used the term inclusionist, which for many means someone who wants to get rid of special education. Decades of research show better outcomes for people with disabilities when they are included and authentic inclusion is happening in schools and districts around the country and the world, some nearing 90% inclusion rates or above for many years. This progress did not just happen. But is the result of careful planning led by educational visionaries and the implementation of strategies that promote effective

inclusive education. It's time to bring back the moniker of inclusionist to meet and collaborator for inclusive practices. Not simply someone who wants to throw the whole system away without replacing it with something better. If this resonates with you, you are an inclusionist. And do we have the newsletter for you! The Weeklyish is for inclusionists subscribe at weeklyish.substack.com.

Tim Villegas (04:39):

Welcome back. And today on the podcast, I'm going to talk a little bit about myself. A lot of you may not know my story and why I even wanted to start Think Inclusive or you know, what my background is and you know why I do the things that I do. So this is a little bit about me. First, before we dive right into the story, I want to tell you about the word inclusionist. For a lot of people, when you say the word inclusionist, it has a negative association. Like someone who wants to get rid of special education or someone who thinks 100% inclusion, no matter what. When I talk about the word inclusionist, I want you to understand the decades research, the stories of successful inclusion and the implementation of inclusive education, the collaboration, the planning, everything that is involved in making inclusive education work. I want, I want you to understand that there is so much behind that word and it's not just somebody thinking that putting students with and without disabilities together in the same classroom is just a nice idea. LRE is not just an idea. It's just a, not a nice thing to do. It's actually the law.

Tim Villegas (06:39):

And when you look at IDEA and you look at the where the assumption is, we start in general education classrooms. That idea is simply glossed over for students with significant disabilities. And the reason I know that is because I did it. I was a self-contained special education teacher or in segregated classrooms. And so, you know, some of my colleagues didn't like me using that term. But you know, I use it and it's supposed to be provocative because it's supposed to make you think. I sat in plenty of meetings with students that could have easily been included in general education classrooms. But when we talk about placement, the team had already decided that general education wasn't the best place. And even if the team had a discussion about general education placement in regular classrooms and the kinds of supports that would need to happen, the mindset was not there. It was already in a space of the team, you know, and sometimes you include the parents, that supplement aids and services just couldn't be provided in a regular classroom.

Tim Villegas (08:13):

And this is one of the things that I really want to drive home for the listeners, for you, whether you're an educator or whether you're a parent or whether you're a disabled advocate or activist who are listening. We need to be providing special education services in general education. And for us to keep making excuses that special education classrooms and separate classrooms are preferable or better for students when all of the data shows otherwise. We need to stop.

Tim Villegas (08:59):

Here's the other thing I want to tell you, and I'm, I'm kind of going off on a tangent, but I hope I hope that this is clear. I don't want to fault educators or parents for making a decision to either stay an educated as a in self-contained classrooms, as segregated classrooms or for a family to, you know, make the decision for your child or family to stay in a segregated classroom or self-contained classroom, because I am not, you know, in that meeting with you. I don't know your personal situation and we all have to make the best choices.

Tim Villegas (09:47):

You know, personally, I stayed in the classroom for 13 years as a, you know, segregated self-contained classroom teacher, all the while trying to move inclusion forward in the schools and the districts that I worked. And here I am on the other side of it with a little bit of perspective, but I also understand how difficult it is. So me exhorting you to make change where you are. I know how difficult that is when you're in the situation that you're in. But I want you to know that I'm on your side. And as far as Think Inclusive and MCIE, we want to equip you with the stories, the research, the data and the practices that will move inclusion forward. But really the burden of this needs to be on school, administrators, principals special education supervisors, assistant superintendents other district leaders that actually have the power to make change.

Tim Villegas (11:08):

You're the ones that need to lead your school to move toward inclusion. And we would love to help you with that. So if you are interested in that, please let us know. But again, I'm really not doing a good job of staying on message here and staying on track. So we're going to try to get back to what I want to say.

Tim Villegas (11:31):

And so let's go back to inclusionist. When I say inclusionist, I don't want to frame it in a way that I just want to get rid of special education and the, I just want to put kids in classrooms, you know, with and without disabilities and nothing will change. There are definitely things that need to change and there needs to be assistant medic way of doing it.

Tim Villegas (12:03):

Now, when I first started in this field of special education, I was definitely a skeptic of inclusive education. And you may be a skeptic too. You may think, "gosh, Tim, I don't really know about this. This is scary. It it seems like the wrong thing to do." So let me tell you just a little bit about my first teaching job.

Tim Villegas (12:30):

So I worked as a special education teacher for students in a segregated self-contained classroom. And there, it was for students with in unquote "moderate to severe autism." And I went the alternate certificate route, which means I got a provisional credential and then got a job and then went to school working full time and then going to school to clear my credential. And so part of my classes was to take a supporting students with challenging behavior type class. I think it was called positive behavior supports. And my professor at the time I remember her name, her name is Dr. Jan Weiner. She charged me to, you know, pick a student in my class who I thought would be the hardest to include and create an inclusion plan for that student. And so I, you know, looked around my classroom. I had, you know, six, five or six students at the time. And so I decided to pick Nathan and Nathan was a student who was considered non-verbal. He had some significant behavioral challenges and a definite sensory sensitivity. And you know, he had some, he had some definite difficulties being around typically developing students. But when it ended up happening was through this inclusion plan we looked at his strengths, we looked at what he was really good at.

Tim Villegas (14:30):

We also looked at his interests and I planned with the fifth grade, a colleague of mine, and she had a science activity that she was planning with her students on creating topography maps. And so basically

we would, we would take a cardboard and draw on the cardboard, the map, and then the students would cut the cardboard and stack it up on top of each other to make a 3D rendering of a, of a topography map. And so Nathan one of the things that he loved to do was cut. In fact, he loved tearing anything. So if you gave him a piece of paper, he would tear it in front of his eyes and rip it into little pieces and then watch the pieces fall onto the ground. And he just loved that and he had a great time doing it.

Tim Villegas (15:35):

So what we did was we set him up to cut the cardboard in the activity. And I know that seems simple at the time, you know, it's something that he loves to do. It's something he's really good at. He was very deft with scissors. And so he sat in that classroom in the fifth grade classroom for the whole segment cutting doing a perfect job and aligning the cardboard with other students to create these topography maps. Now once I saw that you could create a lesson around strengths and you could create meaningful participation in, you know, in otherwise a very difficult thing to understand topography. Once I saw that in action, I realized that inclusion for Nathan inclusion for students with significant disabilities is possible. It's not only possible that, but once you actually plan for the success of all students it can happen.

Tim Villegas (17:01):

And so did this particular assignment with Nathan, did it set him on a course for full inclusion? No. No, it didn't. But it did open my eyes to think, "well, if Nathan could do this, who else could do this? Who else in my class, could I start to push into general education classrooms and have success with them being in participating and learning with their peers?"

Tim Villegas (17:34):

So after about four years in Pasadena we moved to Georgia. And I started working for a district here and found myself teaching in a segregated classroom for students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities. And during that time, the Georgia Department of Education reached out to my school district and asked, "Hey, is there anyone, you know, in, in that teaches a self-contained classroom that would consider working with one of our you know, a consultant on, including a student with significant disabilities in general education?"

Tim Villegas (18:22):

And so the school district already knew that this was something that was on top of mind for me. And so they said, "Hey Tim, would you like to do this?" And I said, "yes, of course I'd love to do that." And so I worked with a consultant. Her name is Gail Wilkins. I can still consider her a mentor and a friend of mine. We still keep in touch. And with consultation with Gail, we developed steps for my student, and his name is Damien, to move from self-contained classrooms or placements to general education classrooms. And we did that from his first grade year, all the way to the fifth grade year. And by the time he was in fifth grade, he was in general education for more than 80% of the time. Now a lot of that had to do with him having a one-on-one aid which again, not everyone can have and in this particular situation it wasn't just about having Damien and his inclusion aid, his one-on-one aid, go into a classroom and just hope for the best.

Tim Villegas (19:47):

Now we did do some planning and we did do some modifications but even this is just the bare minimum of what we did, isn't the inclusive education, the vision that I have now where with collaborative planning and a systematic change. But it was a start and it was something that spurred me on to going, "I think that there's something more to this and I want to know more, but I just don't know where to look." And so that's where, you know, creating Think Inclusive the blog first came about and me starting to write about, you know, my thoughts about inclusion and then having other educators write and other, you know, self-advocates or disabled advocates write about their impressions of the school system and just life in general and how they, they feel like they're, they've been treated. That and creating Think Inclusive made me realize that there's a lot of us out there. There's a lot of people who want to see inclusion move forward. But there's a lot of us that don't know how.

Tim Villegas (21:12):

After 13 years in the classroom, I moved to a district level position and we had many different names, but by the time my last year in that position, it was called the special education program specialist. And I worked with curriculum support for, you know, modify for self-contained and modified, adapted curriculum classes and behavior support. And so that means I did functional behavior assessments. I assisted in school teams and creating positive behavior supports and you know, general support for whatever school that I was at. And I really did love that job. But that was an assumption that students in as students with significant disabilities, whether you're talking about, you know, autism intellectual disability or emotional behavior disorders that, you know, they just didn't really fit in to regular classes. And they needed something different and something special meaning they need to be put in a either program or another class. And for, you know, and, and that's not anything that's out of the ordinary. And I would say, you know, I don't have any data on this, but I would say that the vast majority of school districts, this is how students with disabilities are served.

Tim Villegas (22:57):

I want to share a thought with you and see if this resonates. So unless authentic inclusion is an expectation throughout an entire school system, it often stops after transitioning to a new school or teacher, inclusive best practices must be communicated from the top down. And it's unsustainable and exhausting when it comes from the bottom up. And let me tell you, this is exactly where I was as an educator. I felt like I was the one that was pushing inclusive education from the bottom up. I was the one trying to convince my special education supervisors that maybe there's a different way we can run our special education program. I was the one trying to convince teachers in general education classrooms that were literally right next to my special education classroom, that if we just rearranged the schedule the students in my classroom could access the curriculum and typical peers. And everyone wins. Everybody wins, you know, it was, it was me going to conferences and meeting people feeling the same way that we were powerless. And the only way that I could've made a particular difference in my school district was to get advanced degrees and move up the ladder and try and, you know, become a school leader. And that felt, that felt limiting to me because I don't feel like you have to go through and get advanced degrees to try and make change.

Tim Villegas (25:09):

Which is one of the reasons why I ended up leaving the school district and, and now working for MCIE, which is an organization that does equip and assist school districts who want to move towards inclusive education. So I want you to think about the biggest barrier to inclusive education. What do you think it

is? Is it funding? Is it mindset? Is it the teachers, or is it something else? From talking to a lot of different people in various school districts over the years, whether it's for the podcast or just, you know, from my own conversations, I believe the biggest barrier for inclusion is school administrators. Their lack of belief that inclusive education actually is worth doing. And when I talk about inclusive education, I have, you know, very specific things that I'm talking about, natural proportions, meaning that you don't have an inclusion class where 50% of the students have IEP. Those students who have IEP are spread out throughout the grade level, and they're supported in different classrooms that special and general education teachers collaborate and have time to collaborate. And the school administrators give them that time to do that because they know that that's important.

Tim Villegas (26:56):

So recently I read an article on Good Morning America. And let me read you the headline, it says "Special education teacher explains why she wants to be called accessibility specialist. One teacher has decided to change her title and has had, and has a powerful message to go along with the switch. Mcalister Greiner Huynh is a teacher in Raleigh, North Carolina. 'I Teach a self-contained adapted curriculum elementary classroom, serving disabled students, K-5,' she told Good Morning America. 'I Am passionate about radical acceptance and disability pride.' In a recent Instagram post, Huynh announced that instead of special education teacher, she will call herself an accessibility specialist. 'At The end of the day, I'm an educator. My students are getting an education, their needs or human needs, and special is only used as a term of othering.' She also told Good Morning America that within the disabled community, euphemisms such as special needs, differently abled or handicapable are pretty wildly rejected. 'When We use euphemisms to avoid using the word disabled, what we are communicating is that being disabled is somehow a bad thing, and we shouldn't label it or talk about it,' she said. 'But In reality, being disabled is just another perfectly valid way of being human.'"

Tim Villegas (28:26):

Now, look, I love a lot about this article. I love what she says, what Huynh says about what she does every day. And I'm going to read it to you. She says, "what I do every day is work to make the school environment accessible for my students, whether that's adapting the curriculum, building in sensory stimming time, providing visual supports, supporting communication development, teaching self-regulation and coping skills, or collaborating with other educators to brainstorm ways to make their own classrooms more accessible."

Tim Villegas (29:09):

I love this description because that is, as an educator, that is what we do. And as someone who's trained in how to do this stuff, make things accessible for students with disabilities this resonates with me. Here's what I don't love about this. And I don't know Ms. Huynh and maybe Ms. Huynh is an inclusionist. Maybe she wants to see inclusion move forward. But here's the problem with promoting and highlighting a great statement like this without the other piece, the other piece is why can't this be done in the context of a general education classroom? Why, when we talk about special education and we talk about making things accessible, especially for students with significant disabilities, is the thought always this service, these skills that an educator provides and implements has to be done in a separate place or a separate area. And that's simply not true. It doesn't.

Tim Villegas (30:26):

I love that Ms. Huynh talks about collaboration because that in essence is one of the biggest pieces that is missing to try to make inclusive education work as a special education teacher, we should be collaborating and be given the time to collaborate with our general ed colleagues. In fact, inclusion does not, or inclusion is not inclusion if that is a miss, if that is missing because when we provide the time to collaborate, when we provide the time to individually plan for students who have the most significant disabilities and we create environments that are accessible, everybody wins, and that is inclusive education. So if you're listening to me, if you're an educator or a parent, a school administrator, tell me what about this description of support that this teacher provides can't be done in a regular classroom? When you look at IDEA and it says, you know, the rationale for moving a student is that supplementary aids and services can't be provided in the regular education classroom. What about this can't be done in a regular ed classroom? And that is one of the things that we need to be asking in placement discussions in IEP meetings. What about these services can't be provided in a regular classroom? And if the team can't answer that, or if the team is having a difficult time answering that, I would relook at that placement.

Tim Villegas (32:27):

Okay. That will do it for this episode of the Think Inclusive podcast. Subscribe to the Think Inclusive podcast via Apple Podcast, Google Play, Spotify, or on the Anchor app. And while you were there, give a review so more people can find us. Also tell your friends about the Think Inclusive podcast, other people who are like-minded, who are inclusionist and want to see inclusion move forward. Have a question or comment, email us at podcast@thinkinclusive.us. We love to know that you're listening. Thank you to patrons, Pamela P, Tori D, Veronica E and Kathleen T for their support of the podcast. And just a reminder, help us reach our goal to reach 50 patrons by going to patreon.com/thinkininclusivepodcast. This podcast is a production of MCIE, where we envision a society where neighborhood schools welcome all learners and create the foundation for inclusive communities. Learn more at mcie.org. We will be back in February with our guest, universal design for learning expert, Katie Novak. We talk about some common misconceptions about UDL, about how it works with students with significant disabilities and why standardized tests are a barrier to inclusive education. Thanks for your time and attention. We'll see you next time.

Follow Think Inclusive on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#) @think_inclusive.

Follow MCIE on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#) @inclusionmd.