



## **The Think Inclusive Podcast**

### **Season 9, Episode 4**

#### **Janice Fialka & Sara Jo Soldovieri | What To Say When Families Think Segregated Special Education Classrooms Are Best**

##### **Tim Villegas (00:00):**

Sometimes, though certainly not all the time, social media can bring about interesting and thoughtful conversations. May 26th, 2021, Facebook, Sara Jo: I was asked yesterday if I thought quote, "(special education classes, parentheses (segregated classes) had any place slash value in education." And just so we are all clear. No, they do not. Comment, AW: I am often surprised at the number of parents who feel their students get better services when segregated. How do you respectfully reply to those parents who feel this way? Janice Fialka: your question is one that deserves to be asked. I am happy to talk in detail about it. As a parent, social worker and activist, I started out believing that special ed was the right place for Micah. That was 30 years ago. With careful research, finding the right leaders in the field, being treated with respect for my own growth and questioning, we eventually learned about inclusion and was won over. It was a journey requiring relationship building and respect for how we all integrate new info.

##### **Tim Villegas (01:21):**

Sara Jo: Such an important question. I can give my experience, but Janice Fialka is an absolute expert. I always start with understanding: what they are afraid will or won't happen in gen ed. So often it is fear and not knowing what inclusion is. Janice: Yes to fear and not knowing, and not rushing folks to know what you know. These thoughts are the beginning of an important article that needs to be made public or even a podcast. Well, folks, you asked for a podcast, you shall receive a podcast. Here is Janice Fialka, author, and activist, telling me about how her journey to inclusion started.

##### **Janice Fialka (02:12):**

Thirty-Some years ago when Micah started public education, he was in a self-contained or segregated classroom. And you know, I was a social worker so I thought services for someone with a label is good. That's what I knew. Right? Thank goodness I unknew that and unlearned that. But Micah came home one day and as the story goes, he said, you know, I want to go in the same door as all my friends. And that's what started us on this journey towards inclusion.

##### **Tim Villegas (02:43):**

And Sara Jo, activist and educator, saying what inclusive education means to her.

##### **Sara Jo Soldovieri (02:49):**

Inclusive education to me is a process by which we include all students, regardless of ability, disability language, national origin, right? Race, creed, sexual orientation in the general education classroom. And we work as educators to create a space in which all these students learn.

**Tim Villegas (03:13):**

Hey, y'all. My name is Tim Villegas. And you were listening to the Think Inclusive podcast presented by MCIE. This podcast exists to build bridges between families, educators, and disability rights advocates to create a shared understanding of inclusive education and what inclusion looks like in the real world. To find out more about who we are and what we do, check us out at [thinkinclusive.us](https://thinkinclusive.us) or on the socials: Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Also take our podcast listener survey. Your responses will help us develop a better podcast experience. Go to [bit.ly/TIPodcastSurvey](https://bit.ly/TIPodcastSurvey) to submit your responses. We greatly appreciate it. Today on the podcast, we interview activists and advocates: Janice Fialka and Sara Jo Soldovieri. We talk about what we really mean by inclusive education, what might make the biggest impact to bring inclusive education to school districts, and how to talk to families who think segregated special education classrooms are really best for their child. We are so glad you're listening. And now our interview with Janice Fialka and Sara Jo Soldovieri.

**Tim Villegas (04:50):**

So today on the Think Inclusive podcast, I'd like to welcome Janice Fialka and Sara Jo Soldovieri. We're going to talk about some really great things today. I'm excited. Would you mind Janice and Sara Jo, if you wouldn't mind just introducing yourself to our audience. And we can start with Janice.

**Janice Fialka (05:12):**

Sure. Yeah. Thanks so much, Tim, for inviting us. I really look forward to the conversation. Nice to be with Sara Jo and nice to see you again, Tim. So the question who am I? I am a longtime activist, advocate. I'm the mother of two adult children, Micah and Emma. Micah has been in the film "Intelligent Lives," featured one of the individuals. He lives interdependently in Syracuse, has an intellectual disability. So in many ways he's been all of our family's teacher or door opener to the world of disability. Long time in that world. I'm a social worker by trade and let's see, I love to shovel snow. So I'll leave it at that a little bit.

**Tim Villegas (06:08):**

I'm glad somebody does... Shovel snow, that is, yeah. Okay. Sara Jo.

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (06:14):**

Yes. And thank you. Thank you so much for having me. Janice, always an honor to talk and work and be in community with you. For those of you who don't know me, I'm Sara Jo Soldovieri. I'm a doctoral student at Syracuse University studying inclusive special education. I'm an inclusive special educator by training. I'm also the proud product of a fully inclusive school which I was first introduced as a child to what inclusive ed is. I was previously at the National Down syndrome Society where I created and ran their inclusive education program. Some of you may have seen me in the recent documentary "Forget Me Not" in which we're bringing to light the situation in New York city with inclusive education. And I am a long time, relatively advocate for inclusive ed disability rights. And I'm happy to be here.

**Tim Villegas (07:09):**

Fantastic. so the, the reason why this all came together was a conversation in a Facebook thread. And to be honest, I don't even remember the posts, but the comments were surrounding you know, what do we do, how do we advocate for inclusive education with parents and you know, and educators who really believe that segregated special education classrooms are our best for their students and for their children? So before we get into that big conversation, why don't we just you know, set some, talk about,

maybe define what we're actually talking about. So, cause I know sometimes when we talk about inclusive education, people have different ideas of what that actually means. So in your words, you know, you don't have to, you know, just have a a specific definition, but yeah. How would you describe inclusive education to our audience. Either Janice or Sara Jo can take this.

**Janice Fialka (08:26):**

Go ahead, Sarah Jo.

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (08:28):**

Perfect. You know, so the lens through which this Facebook post was looking at was for students with intellectual and more what we used to consider complex disabilities, right. And I like to kind of push back on that notion of what a complex disability is. But inclusive education to me is a process by which we include all students, regardless of ability, disability language, national origin, right? Race, creed, sexual orientation in the general education classroom. And we work as educators to create a space in which all these students learn.

**Janice Fialka (09:06):**

Yeah. Thanks, Sarah Jo, I think that is really important to lift that up. It's sort of the way that I, as a mother and maybe as a social worker, frame it so similarly. Is that it's kids with and without disabilities or labels learning, laughing, being in the same classroom and receiving the necessary supports that they need. That's so important. It's not, just as we used to say, dumping kids in the same classroom. So that they can really thrive and grow. And that grow is so relative to the individual as well. And they're growing as an individual and their cognitive emotional, but also as a community. They're growing as an inclusive community. So that would be what I would add.

**Tim Villegas (10:00):**

What do you think are the biggest barriers to realizing, you know, that vision of what we're talking about with inclusive education?

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (10:11):**

I mean, I think it's a multifaceted issue, right? We have, you know, as a scholar in looking at teacher prep programs, we have teacher prep programs that still teach students have to earn their way in. It's not an accepted notion of presuming competence. So we have a structural issue in how we're training future teachers. We have a structural issue in that IDEA allows for segregation, you know, LRE is flawed. And I know some folks don't want to touch IDEA, but I'm one that says, you know, we have to move past the segregated, allowing for segregation. And then there's a mindset issue, right? There's a, we don't, I don't think as a society, we do enough to educate folks around presuming competence, around disability justice around, you know, these models of disability. And the assumption just sort of is that parents will, once they have a disabled child that they'll do all this back work.

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (11:11):**

But that's not fair. And that's how we see, you know, those who have the most privilege, really pushing for inclusive ed because they're the ones who can spend the time, do the research, right, hire an advocate, take time off of work. And so we have to be able to meet parents where they're at and explain the benefits and also get past that fear. Because when you have parents who didn't go through an

inclusive education, who don't have the resource, the economic, the different capitals to do this, you know, that's why we have folks who continuously perpetuate this even for their own students.

**Janice Fialka (11:49):**

Yeah. Excellent. Yeah. I want to keep revisiting each of the things that you raised up, Sara Jo. My number one point was teacher preparation, but that's sort of the long-term. But in terms of the specific, I think one of the things. Our daughter, Emma is now a principal in Boston very supportive and skilled in inclusive education. And one of the things I asked her last night, well, how to respond to this question was, she said there's an overemphasis on finding the right setting as opposed to creating the right setting. And I just thought, you know, that's it, we don't, none of us really know how to do this. I mean, none of us really know how to live. Right. I mean, and so we moved into it through conversation and reflection. And I'll just add that I think one of the things that we noticed as we supported Micah to be fully included was that there wasn't the emphasis on conversation or reflection among all of the professionals. So we can learn so much when the speech therapist or the general ed teacher or the art teacher or the maintenance person come together and explore what's working and what isn't working. So those structures of reflection also I think, need to be in place. So that's a couple of thoughts to add.

**Tim Villegas (13:17):**

Do you think the IEP process is a barrier?

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (13:23):**

Absolutely. I mean, I put something out again. I say I'm on social media to cause problems, but I put something out a few months ago that said I'm not interested in working within special education systems. I'm interested in burning down the structures that we have, these systemic issues of segregation. The IEP allows kids to be segregated. And I had a professor at SU once that said, if you build it, you'll fill it. Right. You build a segregated spot, you're going to find kids who you think fit there. So I would love to see what we have completely thrown out and let's build it. Let's build it again.

**Janice Fialka (14:03):**

Yeah, that's great. You know, what we learned is that often the general ed teachers really did not pay attention or even read the IEP. And so we created a one page form. It used to be 10 pages, but then I realized most professionals do not have time to read all of that. So it's just a one page conversation about what Micah is learning, what other, what we've all learned in terms of how support to support him, you know. And eventually we did something that I know a lot of people haven't done is that Micah's peers were involved in exploring with him and the teachers what's working and how do we support them. So again, it's also these engagements of community that I mentioned. In fact, I'll just quickly share, my husband, who's a longtime activist from the sixties and really understands the importance of changing the system. When we would go to the IEP meetings, he would say the first IEP goal is to change the school, a big noble issue. Right. But yeah, I think that's really important, Sara Jo, is that how much the IEP really segregates in and of itself. Thank you for that.

**Tim Villegas (15:18):**

This is something that Sara Jo, I know Janice knows, but something, Sara Jo, you may not know about me was that I taught in segregated self-contained classrooms for well, essentially 13 years. And so, and since my first year I got my teacher training was at Cal state Fullerton California state university, Fullerton, where I was trained in inclusive education. But then I had to get a job. And my job had was,

my credential was in adapted or modified curriculum. And so what ends up happening for me and for a lot of other people who believe in inclusion, the only job that you can get is in a segregated self-contained classroom. So even though I tried to make change at my schools in California and then following my move to Georgia it's difficult to make change from the inside out. Right. and sometimes there just aren't the options that are available. So I'm making that connection to families who say, no, no, no, no, I don't want that for my child. I don't want to have my child endure all of the barriers that it's going to take for this, for their education to be successful. So I'm wondering is do you run across that in your day to day conversations? And what would you say to a parent who is struggling with this concept?

**Janice Fialka (17:13):**

Well, I'll start. I wouldn't say a lot initially. I would listen and, you know, I talk a lot about this in my work is listening is one of the most underrated skills because it looks so easy. You know, you just sort of lean in, nod your head, but listening when you really are present with the other person's thought takes an enormous amount of work, right. Because you have to challenge yourself to be with. So that's one of the things that in my own work that I do a lot of you know conversations about is to step back and listen and build a relationship with families or teachers or whatever it might be. That's hard when we feel so passionate about something. I mean, and we're so clear that this is a really humane way to go, right. Inclusion and social justice.

**Janice Fialka (18:12):**

So I think that not negating the importance of listening, asking what are your fears? What are your hopes? What is it about special ed that, that, you know, you feel like is the right answer or the right way of being? So not to rush to responses, not to rush to resolution. And that is hard. One, when you feel passionate, two, when you feel like you don't have a lot of time and three, when, you know, you want to give so much to the child. So I, so enough said, but I could go on and on about that, I think it I'll end it, turn it over to Sara. Maybe I'll say two things. One is listening can help build relationships. And relationships is the place, the safe place where we can explore differences and things that were, are unknown to us.

**Janice Fialka (19:06):**

I will say that to you 30-some years ago, and Micah started public education. He was in a self-contained segregated classroom. And you know, I was a social worker so I thought services for someone with a label is good. That's what I knew, right? Thank goodness I unknow that, unlearned that. But Micah came home one day and as the story goes, he said, you know, I want to go in the same door as all my friends. And that's what started us on this journey towards inclusion. But we had to also hear the stories from other families about what that meant. So sometimes it might take three, four or five years to move into that. So I'll stop there, Sara Jo and go forward.

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (19:53):**

No, I, I think that that's all where I would say I start as well as is, is listening. And it is hard, right? Because as I'm one, who's, you know, I would get rid of all segregated spaces today if I could find that magic wand. But understanding what is, what is your fear with this? What are you afraid of? Because often it comes from I found that it comes from a place that I want to protect my child. I then follow up with the, well, where do you see your child in 15 years? Because after K12 education, we cannot create an artificial environment for them in the way that we do. There's also this, this piece about parents

knowing their rights. So many folks I talk to say, well, I'm told this can only happen over here. And so that misunderstanding of, no, you can still have the most intensive services in a gen ed classroom.

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (20:45):**

We're not rolling a student out to just sink or swim. And then really diving into what skills, when we talk about skills that students need, when they graduate K-12 education, what is that? It's not being able to fold towels. It's not having a coffee cart. It's having relationships with peers and advocating for yourself and having critical thinking skills. And the best place for that is general education. And so helping parents come along and understanding that. And sometimes it can take, right. Sometimes I have folks I work with and I'm like, let's just start with specials. Like, if we're really fearful, let's start there. And then we work our way up, and I'm comfortable doing that because I've never had a family come back and say, I wish we hadn't done that. Because inclusion works when you have the right support. So sometimes it's building that trust. And that can be said with schools to the families and schools of let's just try it, let's try it. Let's give all the supports. And I was a betting person. I'm going to bet on inclusion every time.

**Janice Fialka (21:51):**

So keep on going.

**Tim Villegas (21:56):**

Well, now, now I forgot what I was gonna say. I wanted to talk about educators or school systems that really dig their heels in. So, you know, we have been talking about families and schools being collaborative. And schools being receptive to change, but there are times when school systems say, no, we're not going to do that. No, your student doesn't belong in the gen ed class. They belong in the self-contained class. So when a family who wants and is advocating for an inclusive education hits that roadblock there's a choice that has to be made. So the choice is, do I fight for what I think is right? Do I have the capacity to fight, right? Or do I say, we're just going to make the best of the situation. Then there's a lot of families that, that are in that situation. So I would love for you to respond to those families. Like what, any advice on, on how to move forward?

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (23:22):**

Well, I will say, and of course I'm not a parent, right? So I always like to say, you know, it's, it's very easy for me to say from my apartment in Syracuse, you know, what, what I think, but it's a different thing to live at. I will say, I believe it's a fight worth fighting for and I say to my families, you know, I will be with you a thousand percent every step of the way. Now I'm not ignorant to think that everyone can go hire a lawyer. Right. that everyone can find an advocate to, to do this. I hope folks find that community and reach out to us. But I will say that, you know, going to mediation, you know, filing due process. Yes, it's scary. But what's even scarier are the phone calls I get from families who have students who are 19, 20, 21 years old in segregated settings who are about to age out and say, we have no skills. We're headed for a shelter workshop. What do we do?

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (24:28):**

And I, I have one family that I worked very, very closely with. And she, the mom keeps reminding me, you either pay now or you paid later. And so how do we balance this? And I think part of it is finding community and looking at alternate ways that are not just the traditional mediation due process. One thing I've been doing with many families and I would first say, I'm not a lawyer. One thing I do with some of my families is we actually revoke consent for special education services and just use a 504 plan and

say, and sort of forced the school districts. Hey, I'm like, you don't want to play my best. Like neither are we. Systemically the problem is school districts tend to have a blank check to work with.

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (25:12):**

So we'll always outlast the families if school districts really dig their heels in enough. So what can we do that gives us the power back? And that's one, one tool we've, I've used it. And I'll say, of course, a small data set, right. But worked a hundred percent of the time that I've implemented it with the folks I've worked with. So I'd want, I want to throw that out there. I feel like that's, that's a, it's a secret folks don't know about. And I want people to remember that that's an option, you don't have to consent to these services.

**Tim Villegas (25:42):**

Yeah. I love it. That is so burn it down, Sara Jo, I love it. I have that. It's funny. We have, we have I work with an advocate here in Georgia where I live that have had, that has done that. And it was like, Ooh, that is so good. Yeah. Janice, did you want to add anything? Oh, sorry, Sarah. Jo, if I cut you off.

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (26:10):**

I was just saying, once I coordinated it, or if I had every student, I was working with students with down, I mostly worked with students with down syndrome. Although I kind of cross every student with down syndrome in that district revoke consent on the exact same day. And guess what they did. They hired an inclusion training to come in the next year, because so again, it's, it's a fun, it's a fun secret, especially if you can coordinate it well.

**Janice Fialka (26:36):**

Well, yes. And, and we need for creative folks like you to tell those secrets because family members often don't know them or educators often don't know them. I, I totally agree with what's being said. I also know, perhaps as a parent and as a social worker, that each family has to also assess where they are emotionally, physically, spiritually. It does, it may take a fight and every family may not be able to be that, do that in that particular moment in their life. So even though a family may have experienced segregation of their child to the age of 19, 20, 21, I also don't want to, and I know you don't either Sara Jo or Tim, limit that you can't make changes at any age., Amazing things happen. And sometimes it takes a different route than what, you know, we might want to advocate for, because I worked with families whose kids have been segregated throughout K through 12, and now they're living more interdependently as well.

**Janice Fialka (27:49):**

So you know, I do think there are small things you can do if you're not able to, at that moment in time, nothing's forever, for the most part that you can, I always say to families and had to practice as myself who in that building is most supportive and gets what you're trying to do to support your child to, to thrive. And there's always somebody, the art teacher, whatever. And that's the person to sit down and say, I'm not asking you to change the system. Talk to me about what we can do in a small way, because that builds community. You, you talked about that Sara Jo, about finding community that's essential. So I want to also give like tidbits of hope as well. So yes. And I just to end with, we, you know, I don't want our son Micah to be the exception. Everybody should have the opportunities that he has too. So, yeah. Good rich conversation.

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (28:53):**

Yes. Thank you for saying that. I think those are all fantastic points. It's never too late to enter an inclusive and interdependent world.

**Tim Villegas (29:05):**

Absolutely. I'm muting myself cause my, my dog is having a moment. Well, is there, is there anything that you wished I would have asked you or anything that you would want to add to our conversation?

**Janice Fialka (29:28):**

Well, I'll, I'll go. Because I think one of the most important lessons that I've learned from Micah and the disability justice community, and many other people is the ability to ask for help or to invite support, which is so contrary to quote the American way. I mean, pretty soon we're going to be, we're going to be celebrating July 4th Independence Day. And if you go to my Facebook that day, I always say I'm changing as if I have any authority. I'm changing the day to happy interdependence day and what I want my kids and my community and myself on my good days to be able to do is to reach out to others. Even when I'm not sure I know how to do it. And to ask for help without apology, but with dignity and respect and intention.

**Janice Fialka (30:33):**

And I think that's at the core of all social movements as well. So I, I'm going to quickly end with a story that Micah has given me permission to tell to illustrate this in such a beautiful way. And then I look forward to hearing Sara Jo. So when Micah was flying at one point he was flying by himself and he wasn't, he wasn't really comfortable flying at that point. And there was terrible turbulence on the plane as they were landing. So I knew when we greeted him at the baggage claim that, you know, he would be a little bit troubled and, and indeed he was. And I said to Micah you know how did you get through that? What was that like? And he said, well, I was really scared. So I turned to the person next to me and told that person that I was a bit scared and would they hold my hand. And I thought, that's the world I want to live in. I won't always get it returned, but more likely I will. So that's the big umbrella that I bring to this conversation. Thanks so much Tim. And please Sara Jo, share.

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (31:44):**

Oh wow. That's such, that's such an amazing point. I think something I've learned in the privilege of knowing you is seeing how much that interdependence is. None of you say this, none of us are truly independent, right? I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for my friendship with Micah, right. Or my friendship with you all and my chosen family and all these people along the way, I would guess I would add the last pieces to question everything. I often say this as a PhD student, I feel like I know less now than I did when I came into it, because I've just left with more questions. And so I asked that for families question, why, why do we do it this way? Why is the system this way for teachers? The same thing? Why, why am I doing this in my practice?

**Sara Jo Soldovieri (32:31):**

And why is the larger school community doing lesson practice? Because I feel I've seen as though we we've gone down this path. If we just do this, because that's what we do. We give an IEP because that's what the system says supposed to. I know that system's not working. So let's dive into it. The last piece, just find a fun community. I get, I, I'm so honored to get calls and texts to teachers all the time that are like, I feel like I'm alone in this. And I'm like, you're not, we're here for you. We're rooting for you. We



are, you know, what do you need? Because there are days it's hard, it's hard work, but it's worth it. And thank you so much for having us for this really important conversation.

**Tim Villegas (33:12):**

Absolutely. Thank you, Janice Fialka and Sara Jo Soldovieri.

**Tim Villegas (33:30):**

That will do it for this episode of the Think Inclusive podcast. Subscribe to the Think Inclusive podcast via Apple podcasts, the Anchor app, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Have a question or comment? Email us at [podcast@thinkinclusive.us](mailto:podcast@thinkinclusive.us). We love to know that you're listening. Thank you to patrons Veronica E., Sonya A, Pamela P, Mark C, Kathy B, and Kathleen T for their continued support of the podcast. When you become a patron, your contribution helps us with the cost of audio production, transcription, and promotion of the think inclusive podcast. And you could even get a shout out like the fine people we just mentioned. Go to [patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast](https://patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast) to become a patron today and get access to all our unedited interviews, including our conversation with Janice Fialka and Sara Jo Soldovieri. Thank you for helping us equip more people to promote and sustain inclusive education. 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](https://mcie.org). We will be back in a couple of weeks to talk with Michael McSheehan, to discuss multi-tiered systems of support, universal design for learning, and why sometimes we are the biggest barrier to inclusive education.

**Michael McSheehan (35:09):**

All the general educators I've ever worked with, once they have that first moment of, oh my gosh, I can reach Jack. Like I am now connected with Jack. And Jack was a student I never knew I could connect with. That teacher's on fire for the rest of the year. They're good. They need that moment. But if we're always in this getting ready for the change thing, and we never put the kids physically in the room, people don't get those great experiences.

**Tim Villegas (35:40):**

Thanks for your time and attention. Until next time. Remember inclusion always works.

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