In Mrs. Higgins' kindergarten class, Michael Grimaldi isn’t known as the boy with Down’s syndrome. He’s just Michael — friendly, stubborn and an avid Teen-age Mutant Ninja Turtles fan.

Yes, his disability makes him different. But his classmates at the Carrie E. Tompkins Elementary School in the Croton-Harmon school district don’t seem to mind. They are taught that it’s just part of what makes him uniquely Michael.


Michael is one of fewer than a dozen children with Down’s syndrome who have been fully integrated — or included — into regular classrooms in Westchester County. Down’s syndrome is a chromosomal abnormality that causes retardation and a variety of health problems. The philosophy behind teaching children with mild to moderate retardation or multiple handicaps alongside regular children is that both can benefit from the social interaction.

To 6-year-old Michael, being with the other kids is heaven. Every morning, he’s picked up by a yellow school bus — just like everyone else. He hangs his green puffy winter coat and black cap on a hook with his name on it — just like everyone else. And he has classmates over to play after school — just like everyone else.

And this year, he had his first birthday party — just for him. In past years, his mother, Caroline Pendzick-Grimaldi, held a combined party for Mi-

Classmate Hannah Tsai helps Michael Grimaldi find pictures of himself in a class album, one of his favorite activities. Above, Michael and Santa.

Accepting Michael as Michael is working wonders in Croton

Please see MICHAEL, back page
chael and his younger brother, Jamie, 4, because she was anxious that Michael wouldn't have enough friends to invite. This year about a dozen classmates attended his party.

The party alone was something Michael's parents never thought would be possible.

"When Michael was first born, I thought he would find his way into an institution. I thought all he could hope for was a segregated, isolated world," said Pendzick-Grimaldi, 39. "In Croton, they treat him like a child first. They see his personality. These are friendships I hope will develop and stay with him through life. When he gets to be an adult and has to rent an apartment, they will already know him."

There is a perceptible gap in Michael's and his classmates' development. Michael has difficulty speaking and forming sentences. He uses a label with his name printed on it instead of writing it out because his motor skills are poor. Each week, he receives seven hours of extra help, including occupational and speech therapy.

Still, the thrust of inclusion, educators say, is on socialization, not on academics. Pendzick-Grimaldi said her son is learning appropriate behavior from his classmates. Children with Down's have protruding tongues. One morning, when a child asked why his tongue was hanging out, Michael self-consciously pulled his in. The problem has been much less noticeable since, she said.

Despite the differences, teacher Cathy Higgins says his classmates are comfortable around Michael. They respond to his hugs and affection. At times, they mother him, helping him find pictures of himself in a class album or put away toys.

Parent Melinda Schatz said she was surprised at how understanding the children are with Michael, especially when he acts a little rough, knocking down block houses or pushing children.

"It's been a real eye-opener for me to see how the children interact. My son Warren genuinely likes Michael as a friend," said Schatz.

The road ahead for Michael will become harder, educators said. With the introduction of abstract thought in upper grades, children with Down's can become frustrated. And as students contend with adolescence, handicapped children may be left out of the cliques and weekend parties.

"It's painful. We certainly hope the relationships will be in place by then and that the students will really care about our kids and include them. But it doesn't always happen," said Emily Perl Kingsley, whose son Jason, who has Down's syndrome, is a sophomore at Lakeland High School.

Barbara Levitz, founder of the Parent Assistance Committee on Down Syndrome, said these problems will diminish as inclusion becomes more common. Educators may be surprised, she said, at what children in inclusion are able to accomplish as they grow older.

Michael's parents are careful not to set unrealistic goals for
Barbara Levitz, founder of the Parent Assistance Committee on Down Syndrome, said these problems will diminish as inclusion becomes more common. Educators may be surprised, she said, at what children in inclusion are able to accomplish as they grow older.

Michael’s parents are careful not to set unrealistic goals for him.

“I’m just happy that he’s happy now. I’d like to think he could graduate with a regular diploma, but that might not be realistic. He might not make it,” said Pendick-Grimaldi.

How about Michael? What does he want to be when he grows up?

“A mix artist, a garbage man ... and an elephant,” he said with a big grin.

“Children act out a song on being unique, which teacher Carol Loatman as part of his routine. Asked if he likes school, Michael said he loves his teachers, friends and the bus.”

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Robyn Pforr

Staff photos by Wendy Vissar
Helping Michael helps everyone

Top left: Classmate Hannah Tsai says Michael has a disability, which means people should be kind to him. His classmates often mother him, by helping him color or guiding him through picture books.

Left: Special education consultant Barbara Hirschman tries to bring Michael's attention back to an art project during her daily class visit. Hirschman likes Michael to work with the group in order to motivate him and so other children can see him learning.
Children act out a song on being unique, which teacher Cathy Higgins added to morning assembly to encourage acceptance of Michael. From left to right: Ashlee Murphy, Arianna Ronci, Hannah Tsai, Sean Michael Carlesimo and Michael.

Right: Everyday, Michael embraces music teacher Carol Loathman as part of his routine. Asked if he likes school, Michael said he loves his teachers, friends and the bus.

On the way back from the library, Michael tires and sprawls on the floor while the children are counted. Michael, still weak from a cold, had a 30-minute session of occupational therapy before the class library trip. Concerned, classmates Hannah Jane Glass and Marco Llano prod him to stand up.
At school, his right at home

By Robyn Pforr
Staff Writer

In Mrs. Higgins' kindergarten class, Michael Grimaldi isn't known as the boy with Down's syndrome. He's just Michael - friendly, stubborn and an avid Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles fan. Yes, his disability makes him different. But his classmates at the Carrie E. Tompkins Elementary School in the Croton-Harmon school district don't seem to mind. They are taught that it's just part of who he is. "I like him. Michael's my friend. He's fun," said classmate Jessica Gurka, 5.

Michael is one of fewer than a dozen children with Down's syndrome who have been fully integrated into regular classrooms in Westchester County. To 6-year-old Michael, being with the other kids is heaven. Every morning, he's picked up by a yellow school bus - just like everyone else. He hangs his green puffy winter coat and black cap on a hook with his name on it - just like everyone else. And he has classmates over to play after school - just like everyone else.

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