

# **Democracy and Special Education Inclusion**

*Rose Rotuno-Johnson, The College of Mt. St. Joseph*

## **Abstract**

The inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom touches upon two items in the Agenda for Education in a Democracy: access to education, and thoughtful participation in the social and political democracy. This paper critiques a political argument for inclusion and develops a concept of inclusion based upon John Dewey's notion of associated living. The inclusion-as-associated living argument reframes the idea of democratic participation and provides a different perspective on why all students should have access to educational settings characterized by a diversity of children.

## ***INCLUSION AS ASSOCIATED LIVING***

### **Introduction**

Two agenda items in the Agenda for Education in a Democracy are 1) to provide access to knowledge for all children (“equity and excellence”), and 2) to educate the young for thoughtful participation in a social and political democracy (“enculturation”) (<http://www.nnerpartnerships.org/about/mission.htm>). Applying these two guiding principles to the education of students with disabilities can be difficult. For instance, while most students identified as needing special education services have access to education in their neighborhood schools, many continue to receive educational services in settings away from their typically developing peers, and/or are placed in low-ability academic tracks where the expectations for achievement have historically been substandard (Oakes, 2005). One possible reason for the exclusion of students with disabilities in the general education environment is the high value placed upon deliberative reasoning because it is looked upon as a requirement for a participatory democracy. However, many students identified with disabilities likely will not take part in the electoral process. This has led some to minimize the importance and relevance that students with disabilities have in a democracy. In this paper, I will critique this politically-based argument for special education inclusion and offer an alternative conception of inclusion, one based upon Dewey’s notion of associated living.

### **Associated Living**

Broadly speaking, Dewey (e.g.1917) believed that all human beings should have the conditions to develop to their fullest potential. In order for that to happen, they must be in society with other humans because humans are social beings by nature. Dewey (1916) also argued that the greater the diversity of the social setting, the more opportunity for people to develop their intellectual and moral being. Hence, the more social associations a student has, the more opportunity he or she has to develop his or her intellect and humanity.

Consider this situation. When students identified with disabilities reach high school, they are often placed (and kept) in the lower academic tracks and special education resource rooms because of their history of academic, adaptive, communication, and/or behavioral problems. Because of this separation from the mainstream educational environment, the students' sphere of social contact is greatly reduced. There are two ways in which their associations are limited. First, the segregated and lower-track classes are often smaller in size than the general education class. Second, these segregated and lower track classes often include the same students year after year. It is this intensification of an already homogeneous class which reduces the students' opportunities for intellectual stimulation and exposure to a variety of life experiences, opportunities which Dewey argued are crucial for democratic, associated living. It is not only the students in the resource rooms and lower academic tracks who are being shortchanged in their associations. In fact, all students are cheated out of a rich educational experience when they are deprived from interactions with a diverse student body.

The following excerpt from *Dewey's Democracy and Education* (1916) is often quoted to highlight the point that his concept of democracy refers to more than a form of participatory government:

The devotion of democracy to education is a familiar fact. The superficial explanation is that a government resting upon popular suffrage cannot be successful unless those who elect and obey their governors are educated. But there is a deeper explanation. A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space for the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of these barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (p. 87, underline emphasis added)

To better understand how this famous quote applies to students identified with disabilities and placed in segregated educational placements, it is necessary to divide the excerpt into two sections: what comes before the emphasized text and what comes after the emphasized text. I do this to draw a distinction between the political basis for associated living—the earlier part of the quote—and what I have come to call the ‘inclusion-as-community’ basis for associated living—the latter part of the quote. This distinction is necessary for outlining my argument on the limitations of a political basis for discussing the merits of inclusive educational settings.

### **The Political Argument for Associated Living**

Becoming a member of our democratic society involves participation. At issue here is the quality and character of participation that is privileged. For many, a mature, contributing member of a democratic society is someone who can think and discuss political and social issues. I argue that this view is exclusive.

For the purposes of this paper, I equate a political argument with an argument that centers upon a person’s ability to deliberate in the political process. It is widely accepted that the political purpose of education in a democracy is to develop a public that can critically take part in the political process. Darling-Hammond & Aness (1996) draw upon Jefferson early in their argument to make a case for equitable access to education on the basis that the population must be educated in order to participate:

Popular intelligence coupled with democratic decision making, Jefferson argued, provides the best protection against tyranny. Public education for democracy, according to Jefferson, had two central and enduring corollary purposes: (1) to prepare all individuals for citizenship by developing within them the capacity for full and intelligent participation in the process of deliberation necessary for self-rule; and (2) to identify and develop responsible leadership from the talents and abilities of individuals rather than from family or group privilege, economic wealth, religion, or race. In order for these purposes to

be achieved, the state would have to provide all individuals with access to educational opportunities sufficient to prepare them for full and intelligent citizenship. (p. 153)

This is the classic political argument for the provision of a high quality education for all citizens, regardless of their gender, race, religion, socio-economic background, or first language. That is, we must create an educational system that teaches all citizens how to deliberate so that all citizens are able to participate in the democratic process.

Darling-Hammond & Aness (1996) draw a connection between an inferior education and an inability to participate in the political process. While doing so, they provide the historical roots of academic tracking in the United States, citing the publication of *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* (1918) as pivotal to establishing differentiated courses of study for high school students in order to prepare for the different social strata in an industrializing society. “What was lost in this (economic) decision was the belief in intellectual development as the proper goal of education for all citizens in a democracy and for whatever future students would pursue” (p. 163). The authors go on to characterize the lower track classes much the same way that Oakes (2005) characterizes them: consisting of a disproportionate number of non-White students and low-income students, and featuring a less engaging and intellectually challenging curriculum. Darling-Hammond & Aness (1996) argue that ultimately, this inferior curriculum “undermine(s) the development of skills needed for enlightened and responsible citizenship—the ability to deliberate, to think critically, and to develop and express one’s voice articulately so as to participate in the shaping of one’s society” (p. 165). The result, then, is that students educated in the lower tracks tend not to participate in the democracy, and thus tend not to have their interests reflected and considered in the democratic process.

Their argument for the need for all to be given an education equal in quality in order for all to participate in critical deliberation in a democracy is a political argument. Gutmann (1983), too,

argues that education for a democracy requires that students be prepared to deliberate. Like Darling-Hammond & Aneess, Gutmann is concerned about providing citizens with the skills and knowledge for democratic participation. Unlike Darling-Hammond & Aneess, however, Gutmann directly addresses the education of students with disabilities, particularly the degree to which a school is responsible for financing the education of students with disabilities.

Gutmann (1983) argues that there should be a “clear and defensible standard” by which decisions are made regarding how much money the government should spend to rectify inequalities in education. She specifically mentions the difficulty of establishing educational policy about distributing education to lower income students via desegregation, and distributing education to students who are “socially and biologically handicapped” (p. 148).

To understand her argument for a democratic standard for the distribution of education, it is necessary to explicate her idea of democratic character. Gutmann (1983) argues that “(primary school-aged) children must learn not just to behave in accordance with authority but to think critically about authority” (p. 51). Critical reasoning alone is not adequate for democratic participation; moral character is also needed. Children in a democracy must be given knowledge and an appreciation of the humanities so they can live a good life. She writes:

Although inculcating character and teaching moral reasoning by no means exhausts the purposes of primary education in a democracy, together they constitute its core political purpose: the development of “deliberative,” or what I shall interchangeably call “democratic,” character. (pp. 51-52)

It is in this excerpt that we clearly see that she equates democratic with deliberation. Thus her argument for democratic education relies on her notion of deliberation. It is this deliberative democratic character that forms the basis for her democratic standard for distribution of public education.

Two principles make up the democratic standard. The first, the democratic authorization principle, “(grants) authority to democratic institutions to determine the priority of education relative to other social goals” (Gutmann, 1983, p. 136). The second, more essential principle to my argument is the democratic threshold. This principle “specifies that inequalities in the distribution of educational goals can be justified if, but only if, they do not deprive any child of the ability to participate effectively in the democratic process” (p. 136). This applies to the education of children with disabilities in the following way. If it is determined that a child has intellectual limits to the extent that s/he can not contribute to the society through deliberation, then schools are not obliged to finance an education that would maximize their learning potential. Thus, Gutmann’s democratic standard for the distribution of education could rightly be called a deliberative standard. This deliberative standard results in a justification for excluding students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

My critique of using a deliberative standard to establish whether students are being educated for associated living in a democratic society centers on the exclusivity of a deliberative standard. Specifically, there are students, by virtue of their physical, cognitive, and emotional limitations, who will never be able to interact in such a way as to autonomously participate in the type of deliberation outlined by both Darling-Hammond & Aness (1996), and Gutmann (1983). Were the notions of deliberation and participation to be construed less narrowly to include types of communication and “presence” that would encompass the impact that these students have on the political process, then my critique would be less valid. For example, the political decision-making of those with close emotional bonds to people with limited communication skills are undoubtedly influenced by that relationship. In this way, people with disabilities can be said to participate, albeit indirectly, in the deliberative process.

Two fictitious examples illustrate the consequences of applying the deliberative standard and excluding students with disabilities

from the general education environment on the basis they can not and probably will not ever deliberate in the political process.

Levona is 19 years old and a senior in a suburban high school with a population of 1500 students. As a result of cerebral palsy, Levona is non-ambulatory, non-verbal, and is reported to have an IQ of 45. Levona spends approximately 85% of her school day in a segregated special education resource room where her interactions are confined to students with moderate to severe disabilities like herself, and to the licensed and paraprofessional special educators assigned to work with students with multiple handicaps. Levona and her classmates interact with others from the school community during their daily 48-minute gym class, taught by a general educator with specialized training in adaptive physical education. The students are also included during school assemblies when all the community is invited to participate.

Mark is 8 years old and in a non-graded special education classroom in his neighborhood elementary school. He has been diagnosed with autism and, as is common for people with this diagnosis, Mark does not communicate with words. The adults who teach Mark and his classmates have specialized training so they can adapt content materials to the appropriate instructional level. Mark is working on concepts typically taught in preschool, including printing his own name. The adults also work with Mark on his communication behaviors. For example, they are trying to get him to express his frustration in socially appropriate ways instead of banging his head, throwing chairs, and spitting on people. Mark's interaction with his peers is confined to seeing them in the halls on the rare occasions when Mark is permitted in the hall during transition times. The district has arranged special transportation for Mark to and from school so that he does not ride the bus with other children.

Given their respective disabilities, neither Levona nor Mark will likely watch the television news, read the newspaper, or engage in dialogue over political issues. Given Gutmann's (1983) equivocation of democratic citizenship and deliberative participation, Levona and Mark will never achieve citizenship. Without citizenship, they will not be entitled to the benefits of the democratic principles

of equal opportunity, freedom to develop to their full potential, fairness with regards access to the benefits of society, and learning in community. This is the logical conclusion of applying a deliberative standard to the education of students with moderate to severe disabilities. This political basis for inclusion results in inequitable access to education.

Others have questioned the limits of arguing for special education inclusion on political and legal grounds. Goodlad (1993), for example, believes that in order for the integration of general and special education to be beyond legal and political debate, the discourse must revolve around moral commitment. That is, access to education is a social justice issue, and, "What all educators must recognize and commit to as part of their professional creed is that their awareness of what is good, right, and beautiful is part of the defense against bureaucratic regulations" (p. 2). In the remainder of this paper, I will argue that the discourse of inclusion should be founded upon Dewey's notion of associated living, for this philosophy of co-existence does not rely on governmental intervention to ensure the integration of all students into an educational setting. Rather, it is based on Dewey's democratic philosophy, particularly his notion of associated living.

### **The Inclusion-as-Associated Living Argument**

One central theme of Dewey's philosophy (e.g., 1916; 1927) is that social experience is necessary for both the individual's and society's growth and well-being. Moreover, Dewey held firm that all humans should have the opportunity to develop to their full potential, and it is in association with others that human potential can be realized.

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) discusses what he means by associations. We all have many types of associations; communities are one form of association. These communities are formed by the common interests of the members. Sometimes the common interest is professional; sometimes it is religious; other times it is geographically based. In each case, interactions are prerequisite for there to be the realization of shared interests. On a

larger scale, for a democratic society to be truly associative, Dewey writes, there needs to be open and free associations of its members so that each can learned about their shared interests. The only way to learn about the other is to interact. Through these interactions people come to realize that others are not so different, not so intimidating, not so inferior or superior. In fact, most people view life as more interesting and colorful when there is variety. Dewey (1916) writes:

In order to have a large number of values in common, all members of the group must have an equal opportunity to receive and to take from others...Lack of free and equitable intercourse...makes intellectual stimulation unbalanced. Diversity of stimulation means novelty, and novelty means challenge to thought. (pp. 84-85)

When we apply Dewey's emphasis on associated living to the school setting, we can view segregated educational settings such as special education resource rooms and other types of academic tracking as undemocratic practices. They are undemocratic because these arrangements systematically prohibit the free association of students. Effectively, students are associating with a homogeneous segment of the population. The result is disadvantageous for intellectual, social, and moral reasons. Segregated educational settings disallow intellectual growth because the arrangement limits the diversity of stimuli.

Segregated educational settings also inhibit social and moral growth because when students aren't given the opportunity to form associations with others unlike themselves then they can't see common interests. In effect, this separation impacts the way students view their world, their place in it, and it effectively limits the student's sense of moral responsibility. Moreover, segregated educational settings shelter students from the varieties of human experience and expression, which when witnessed, contribute to a greater understanding of the human condition. Thus, it is important that all students be educated in diverse environments, for to fail to do so

would be to limit their associations, and hence limit their opportunity for intellectual, social, and moral growth. Fitch (2009) makes the point this way: “Continuing to maintain schools and classrooms in which disability is removed, hidden, or merely tolerated not only restricts cognitive development, it teaches a negative moral lesson to young children while diminishing moral capacity in the entire community” (p. 175).

A democracy is pluralistic, and so to be democratic we must embrace the pluralism, the diversity, the difference. In doing so, we not only evolve as a society, we also evolve our intellects and our interests, and as a result our participation is affected from this enlarged world view.

Likewise, inclusive educational environments provide students—all students—with a variety of social interactions. Moreover, it is not only the students with disabilities that benefit from being in the general education classroom with their non-identified peers. All students benefit because they have the chance to interact with a wider, more diverse population, including those students who have difficulties with reading, writing, self-calming, and self-feeding. Inclusive educational environments create pluralistic educational communities because they allow students to more freely form associations with others unlike themselves. In doing so, inclusion allows students to realize that there are common interests, tastes, likes and dislikes among those who don’t look, speak, act, or respond in the ways they do. More to the point, inclusive educational environments better mirror the pluralistic society that is our democracy. Schools can better prepare youth for citizenship in our multi-generational, multi-gendered, multicultural, and multi-linguistic society when students with significantly disabling conditions, such as Levona and Mark, are allowed to learn and interact with their non-disabled peers.

While much of the chapter by Darling-Hammond & Ancess (1996) highlights the political reasons for equal educational access, later in the chapter the authors turn to Dewey for a moral and social foundation for diverse educational settings. In the section entitled “Access to Democratic Community,” the authors argue that

schools should fulfill the Deweyan democratic ideal of pluralism so that school children are not only familiar and experienced with the plurality of ideas and viewpoints that are present in our society, but so children are aware of how they are socially, intellectually, and spiritually enriched by that plurality. Regarding the need to create situations for associated living among children, Darling-Hammond & Aness (1996) write:

(Dewey) spoke of the building and extension of associations as one of the ways in which we should evaluate social modes of life, including schools. Given that a society is an association with shared interests, and that all of us belong to a wide variety of societies of different kinds, the worth of these associations can be gauged by asking, first, "How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? And, second, "How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?" (p. 167)

Like Dewey, they advocate for social settings that provide opportunities for interactions between a diverse array of people. From Darling-Hammond & Aness' perspective, we can conclude the inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education setting has democratic merit because it has social, educational, and deeply moral merit.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Pondering the relationship between democracy and special education inclusion compels one to examine two principles of the Agenda for Education in a Democracy, access to education, and thoughtful participation in the social and political democracy. The major purpose of this paper is to examine what is meant by "participation."

Echoing Dewey (1916), Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad (2004) write:

...to think of democracy as merely a political system in which people get to vote once in a while is to miss entirely the very essence of what democracy is all about. Democracy, first and foremost, is a shared way of life. It begins with who we are as individuals and the relationships we have with those around us, and it radiates outward from that center to encompass all of humanity. (p. 82)

A concept of inclusion based upon a student's ability to deliberate in the political process ultimately results in the continued segregation of students with disabilities because some students, by virtue of their handicapping condition, will never be able to deliberate in the political process. As an alternative to the political argument for inclusion, I propose an inclusion-as-associated living argument based upon Dewey's notion of associated living. This is because heterogeneous classrooms better represent the diversity of our population than do segregated educational placements and homogeneous classrooms, and it is with this diversity that students can find common associations with one another. Moreover, in inclusive school settings, all students benefit in intellectual, social, and moral ways because they are more likely to interact with others unlike themselves and in so doing, develop a greater awareness of the human condition. Moreover, the inclusion-as-associated living argument provides a different perspective on what is meant by educating the young for thoughtful participation in a social and political democracy by conceptualizing participation to include non-deliberative communication and presence, and recognizing the value that such participation has on all members of the democracy.

It is my hope that the inclusion-as-associated living argument compels educators to consider the benefits that special education inclusion has for the educational, moral, and democratic development of all students.

## REFERENCES

- Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*. (1918). Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Education, no. 35.
- Darling-Hammond, L. & Aneess, J. (1996). Democracy and access to education. In R.Soder (Ed.), *Democracy, education, and the schools* (pp. 151-181). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: Macmillan Company.
- Dewey, J. (1925/1988). The development of American pragmatism. In J.A. Boydston (Ed.), *John Dewey: The later works, 1925-1953* (Vol. 2, pp. 3-21). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1927/1998). The public and its problems. In L. Hickman & T. Alexander (Eds.), *The Essential Dewey* (Vol. 1, pp.293-307). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Fitch, E.F. (2009). Moral philosophy, disability, and inclusive education. *Philosophical studies in education*, 40, pp. 167-177.
- Goodlad, J.I. (1993). Access to knowledge. In J. I. Goodlad & T. C. Lovitt (Eds.), *Integrating general and special education* (pp. 1-22). New York: Merrill.
- Goodlad, J.I., Mantle-Bromley, S.J., & Goodlad, S.I. (2004). *Education for everyone: agenda for education in a democracy*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Gutmann, A. (1987). *Democratic education*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality* (2nd. ed.). New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press.

**Rosemary Rotuno-Johnson** is an Assistant Professor in the TEAM-MSE program at The College of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati. She earned her Ph.D. from Miami University's Department of Educational Leadership.