

Thoughts on Dewey's Democracy and (Special) Education

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Rationale

It seems almost incredible to us, for example, that things which we know very well could have escaped recognition in past ages.

—John Dewey (1916, p. 21)

Equality is not sameness. In special education, all aspects of education and access are framed with the understanding that what is fair is not necessarily equal. In an age of heightened awareness of civil rights for many marginalized groups of people, our culture confuses “equality” with “equity.” Equality never guarantees, nor should it, that all will be equal. As Garrison (2012) posited, “equality is the antithesis of sameness...Democratic moral equality celebrates incommensurably unique, one-time-only qualitative individuality” (p. 370).

The centennial of Dewey's (1916) classic *Democracy and Education* reminds scholars about the love Dewey brought to the field of education, and by inference, special education. This anniversary leads to the contemplation of the issues of promise in education through social justice, and how differently special education practices would look if Dewey were alive today. The authors imagine Dewey's voice echoing through the century was resounding clearly with the promise of a true democratic education for all children. This article conceptualizes special education in relation to Dewey's vision of democratic education and how that would be framed in *Democracy and Education*.

It is the goal of this article to postulate how Dewey would have

imagined an education system had he the knowledge available today. This conceptual argument was directed by the question: What would Dewey say about modern inclusionary practices of students with special needs in a regular education classroom? The authors posit that an examination of the current American education system through Dewey's gaze would reveal that special education, as conceptualized under IDEA (2004), would not exist if Dewey had been born a few decades later.

The authors further postulate that education and educator preparation would include a focus on all children regardless of difference, and educators would differentiate based on each student's strengths and needs had one of the seminal works in our field been able to incorporate the knowledge and understanding of children with exceptionalities available in this day and age. The authors agree with Danforth's (2008) premise that Dewey would view disability as a social construct and that what disables a person is not an innate difference, but the way society interprets difference as aberrant. This paper seeks to illuminate Deweyan philosophy and its effect on special education by addressing these major topics: (a) the current state of American (special) education; (b) Dewey and inclusion; and (c) philosophy in special education

The Current State of American (Special) Education

At the beginning of the 20th century, people with severe exceptionalities were not educated in public schools and few were raised by their families. It was customary for these individuals to be recommended by the family physician for institutionalization at a very young age. These people were shielded from society and society was shielded from them. It is not surprising that Dewey did not refer to people with exceptionalities in any uncertain, or more historically representative, terms in his pivotal work, *Democracy and Education* (1916). That does not preclude the idea that Dewey's ideas are not directly relevant and applicable to the structure of today's inclusive schools.

In fact, Baglieri and Shapiro (2012, p.67) stated that they are not "feeble minded" was the general consensus and terminology of the early 20th century. In light of these policies and practices, Dewey himself was not shaped by experiences with people with exceptionalities. He was shielded from this population. Dewey's own *Pedagogic Creed* (1897) did not take into consideration the psychological and sociological needs of students with exceptionalities. By revisiting *Democracy and Education* with a critical lens, the authors postulate how Dewey would have envisioned inclusive school practices such as co-teaching, differentiated instruction, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Situated in Deweyan philosophy through this uniquely interpretive lens, Dewey's *Pedagogic Creed* would have one believe schools are in a unique situation to mimic society and help children understand their places therein (Dewey, 1897). Historically, when special education services in public schools were organized for individuals with significant exceptionalities (e.g., low functioning autism, medically fragile, severe cognitive impairments), they were separate, as mirrored in society. This was accomplished through an emphasis of difference and deficit which was clearly exemplified as these students were often educated in separate buildings or classrooms rarely were allowed to interact with their normally functioning peers (Raymond, 2011).

Analyzing *Democracy and Education* (1916) through Dewey's description of democratic schooling led to a unique perspective of how embedded, dichotomous thinking about education practices maintains and perpetuates a normalizing system of general versus special education. This denies social justice for all students, contradicting the democratic principles of an American education. Ashby (2012) noted, "The separation between general and special education is neither natural nor inevitable" (p. 98). If traditional teacher preparation programs do not sufficiently prepare general education teachers to reach the diverse students they will have in their classrooms, it only serves to embed a dual education-track mindset in the American system of schooling. Because society has become more inclusive and Dewey (1897) would have school primarily be a social institution representing present life, a major paradigm shift in teacher preparation programs is critical for ushering in true social justice and democratic education for all students.

If teacher preparation programs could effectively equip all future educators to (a) recognize characteristics of exceptionalities, (b) differentiate curriculum for diverse learners, and (c) effectively implement a positive behavior support system, dual-track systems of special education versus general education could be eliminated. Instead, American schools could offer a truly democratic education based on a bedrock of social justice by allowing true equal opportunity for all students. More than at any other time in American education, general educators need to accommodate instruction thereby allowing equitable education for a wide range of students in their classrooms.

The responsibility for training these educators belongs to teacher preparation programs. Dewey (1897) believed in the power of connecting the purpose of schooling directly to the individual's needs (the psychological) and then to the social interaction in order to give learning purpose. Later, Dewey (1916) envisioned learning as an interactive process where new knowledge builds on prior knowledge within that social interaction.

Viewed through this critical lens, those with (dis)abilities have greater autonomy and an equal voice to express their experiences, thus allowing them equal power in their education (Gallagher, 2004). In what Garrison (2012) described as “creative democracy” (p. 369) education should provide students with the ability to be critical thinkers and challenge social constructs that corrupt and separate people. Current teacher preparation paradigms negate the legacies of hope promised through decades of reform and policy since *Brown v. Board of Education* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA, 2004). This dual educational track in schools actually entrenches segregated thoughts in educating typically developing students apart from those with differences. In response to troubling data about the post-school outcomes for individuals with disabilities, various reforms efforts are being proffered to ameliorate the issue (Naraian & Oyler, 2014).

Teacher preparation programs have, historically, equipped educators for separate areas of teaching: general or special education (King-Sears, Carran, Dammann, & Arter, 2012). The problem is that teachers in general education are often insufficiently trained to differentiate either the curriculum or the classroom environment for students with varying levels of academic or behavioral needs. Lack of preparation to accommodate the curriculum, classroom environment, and behavior may lead to the teacher incorrectly recommending students with differences for special education testing rather than providing needed interventions (Gehrke & Cocchiarella, 2013). Dewey (1897) saw that the school was the center of social progress, but in order for this to be achieved, it was necessary to endow the educator with the tools necessary to perform the tasks required. The proper teacher preparation, in this case, is what is needed at this time in society where diversity means understanding the needs of all children in a classroom.

Dewey and Inclusion

Inclusion as a Necessity of Life

Beings who are born not only unaware of, but quite indifferent to, the aims and habits of the social group have to be rendered cognizant of them and actively interested. Education, and education alone, spans the gap. (Dewey, 1916, p.6)

The authors imagine Dewey would stress that students with exceptionalities cannot learn on their own, that they would need support to understand the world into which they have been born. Inclusion, at its basest form, exists as a matter of placement or educational setting in

which children with exceptionalities are enrolled in programs that are designed for typically developing children. In this version of an inclusive classroom, the children with exceptionalities have the ability to interact with their nondisabled peers. Recent developments in educational policy and best practice call for inclusion of students of all ability levels to be educated in the same setting to the maximum extent possible or appropriate (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a). There are dichotomous viewpoints as to the extent to which this setting should be implemented with Fuchs and Fuchs (1998) on one side believing there should be a continuum of services from special homes to full time general education placements, to Stainback and Stainback (1984) on another side who believe that full inclusion in the general setting is the only true option. An initial look at *Democracy and Education* (1916) would suggest that Dewey may have supported this idea of inclusion as he notes that the “very process of living together educates” (Dewey, p. 9).

Though tension exists about the degree of implementation, this minimal definition of inclusion is in accordance with the natural and least restrictive environment provision in the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 2015a) protecting the right of individuals with disabilities to be educated to the maximum extent appropriate among their same aged nondisabled peers. This is an additive approach to special education, and some are of the opinion that inclusion is an ongoing process; that practice of this sort will lead to further marginalization of children with disabilities. Dewey (1916) showed similar concerns in that he saw the formalization of the schooling process and focus on imparting information as detracting from the benefits of socialization and formations of social dispositions vital to experiencing life with meaning.

Inclusion as a Social Function

A second, and widely accepted, definition in the field sees inclusion not just as a setting, but as a purposeful way to help a child with disabilities to become part of the community in which they live and society in general. Proponents of this definition of inclusion argue that it is not enough to merely put a child with disabilities in an environment designed for typically abled children, but one must work to ensure the child’s participation in activities and development of relationships. The term should convey that children with disabilities are an integral part of their classrooms, accepted by their classmates, and desired by their friends. The focus on the social experience of children with disabilities in general education environments is a noted paradigm shift in the field of both sociology and special education. Again, Dewey’s (1916) *Democracy*

and Education grows its definition and philosophy of education as more than a system set up to train the immature members of society in the process of desirable thought, but instead as a means to allow children to know what it means to be members of a tribe. Dewey contends that through group membership, each member can share successes and failures; thereby, developing a culture of concern for your fellow man or classmate. This principle runs through each fiber of special education legislation and best practices. Finally, this principle seeks to not only serve the students with disabilities, but also their same-aged, typically developing peers.

Inclusion as Direction

Still a third interpretation of inclusion takes instruction beyond that which is directed solely towards the students with special needs, but instead it is a pedagogy designed to be accessible by all students from its inception. Inclusive pedagogy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) supports the achievement of all children in the classroom. It allows an opportunity for students “to have the same ideas about the things which others have, to be like-minded with them, and thus to be really members of a social group” (Dewey, p. 35). An inclusive classroom, in this sense, is characterized by universal accessibility of both environment and curriculum. The general curriculum does not need to be modified to meet the needs of students with disabilities; it is already accessible by design. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) describe current and outdated additive inclusionary practice as the “process of providing for all by differentiating for some” (p. 826). Jordan et al (2009) found that meeting the needs of all students on individual levels is good practice and will serve to benefit all students in inclusive classrooms, both those who have disabilities and those who are typically developing.

As a matter of importance, Dewey (1916) noted the natural or native impulses of children do not always coincide with what is expected of them in society. It is necessary to consider, in today's inclusive environments, that experiencing joint and shared situations leads to a different kind of socialization. By implementing inclusive pedagogy such as that proposed by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) early and throughout school settings, students will have the exposure to the kind of moral and social dispositions towards individuals with exceptionalities that will influence their own mental dispositions. As students experience environments that are designed with everyone in mind, it will become more apparent that people with exceptionalities are not oddities or targets. They are typical members of society, and it is important that children learn how to work with, be around, and be friends with people of all abilities. Hav-

ing teachers and educators who practice inclusive pedagogies will help to serve as models in this endeavor. Dewey theorized, “Social control of individuals rests upon the instinctive tendency of individuals to imitate or copy the actions of others. The latter serve as models” (Dewey, p. 39), and this can be directly applied to the direction of inclusive education in the present day.

The Democratic Concept in Inclusion

The school, as an entity, is a place of natural diversity. Dewey (1897, 1916) wrote that the school needed to be a direct reflection of the community in which it is placed. In addition, Dewey strongly suggested that no part of this community or society should be ignored. An advocate for inclusion without knowing it, Dewey spoke negatively about the effects of isolation on any given population. Further noting “an alert and expanding mental life depends upon an enlarging range of contact with... the sphere of social contacts” (Dewey, 1916, p. 93). Therefore, we live in a society of diversity. Meaning, all persons in our society are different, and finding respect for these differences make us better practitioners.

There are various categories that make students diverse. Categories of diversity may include: (a) ethnicity, (b) socioeconomic status, (c) spiritual and religious beliefs, (d) sexual orientation, (e) intellectual ability levels, and (f) geographical regions. Some subgroups also may include educational background, occupation, and even levels of parent’s income. Smith (2012) labeled these categories as visible (e.g., race, gender) and invisible (e.g., spiritual and religious beliefs, sexual preferences) diversity and encouraged educators to celebrate the differences of the diversity to promote democracy in our society. The democratic ideal would have these groups come together to share common interests and use the recognition of those interests to gain more social control. Additionally, and more relevant to the topic of inclusive education, Dewey (1916) would see freer interaction between people with exceptionalities and other students as a product of diversification and a change in social habit. Together, this intentional readjustment to the educational system and its resulting effects are what Dewey would characterize as a “democratically constituted society” (Dewey, 1916, p. 93).

Specifically related to students with various ability levels, Dewey (1916) passionately believed that all students should be provided an option to learn. He stresses the relation of Platonic Educational Philosophy as a function of individualization in education (e.g. discovering and developing personal capacities), a tenant inclusive educators feel strongly about. Still, Dewey identifies that Plato failed to acknowledge the uniqueness of individuals outside of class structures. Specifically,

Dewey mentions the need to recognize active tendencies and capabilities in relation to diversity. When revisiting *Democracy and Education* with a critical lens, it is this kind of progressive statement that lends itself to direct application of inclusive philosophy. Dewey suggested “the two points selected by which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups” (Dewey, 1916, p.106). Furthermore, Dewey stated that all citizens must share in the productivity of the society and this production is learned in the educational setting. Dewey does not leave students with exceptionalities out of this equation, rather, he strongly advises educators to work together to build all persons’ strengths.

Interest and Discipline

Due to the inclusive nature of today’s education system, it is no longer appropriate to train teachers in basic pedagogy and delivery of content; teachers must be able to identify and subsequently prepare interventions, accommodations, and inclusive environments for students who are at risk for failure or who have identified exceptionalities. This new invaluable set of skills often requires some formal professional development or training in special education (Valli & Rennert-Ariev, 2000; Blanton, Putagh, & Boveda, 2014). Similar to Dewey’s contention that the organism must regenerate and adapt to its environment, interdisciplinary work emerges as a consequence of evolving industry and science (Newell, 2001). Colleges of teacher education have been forced to consider creative solutions to the discipline specific nature of higher education institutions in order to meet federal regulations on teacher training and quality. Specifically, NCLB (U.S. Department of Education, 2015b) required that teachers be highly qualified. For special education teachers, particularly those teaching in secondary settings, state interpretation often resulted in requiring state certifications in both special education and a core academic area (i.e., a general education teacher certification; Blanton & Pugach, 2007). Consequently, traditional special education teacher preparation programs in higher education have had to respond to state mandates using non-traditional, or creative, measures.

The disciplinary take on teacher education is partially brought on by prior social conditions. As the students with exceptionalities were isolated, so was their instruction, and instructors of students with exceptionalities received separate training. Dewey (1916) saw the integration of disciplinary instruction as a challenge to overcome, but it seems that colleges of education are in good position to find success in the endeavor. Dewey (1916) predicted,

... persons whose interests have been enlarged and intelligence trained by dealing with things and facts in active occupations having a purpose (whether in play or work) will be those most likely to escape the alternatives of an academic and aloof knowledge and a hard, narrow, and merely 'practical' practice. (p. 147)

Experience and Thinking/The Nature of Method

Dewey (1938) revisited his philosophy briefly to describe the experience of the progressive schools. Continuing to view Deweyan philosophy through a critical lens, the authors noted that Dewey found an urgency to include a philosophy of experience in addition to the focus on current disciplinary methods. One common attempt at breaking disciplinary tradition in teacher education is to offer pre-service teachers training in collaborative or dual certification programs (i.e., preparation for certification in both general and special education; Blanton & Pugach, 2007; Blanton & Pugach, 2011; Pugach, Blanton, & Corraera, 2011), thus giving them more real experiences in inclusive and special education settings prior to joining the teaching profession. In order to develop teacher certification programs resulting in effective preparation in both general and special education teaching practices, diverse areas of expertise are necessary (Blanton & Pugach, 2007). Blending two traditionally different perspectives (i.e., general and special education teacher preparation) can prove challenging, yet provides an ideal environment for utilizing the co-teaching model (York-Barr, Bacharach, Salk, Frank, & Beniek, 2004). The most obvious co-teaching stage to be included in dual certification programs is co-programming or co-planning.

Co-programming. Faculty in teacher preparation programs have to navigate multiple governing and accrediting bodies in order to meet national, state, university, college, and departmental regulations. Furthermore, regulations for general education and special education teacher preparation programs often differ quite significantly, causing faculty to employ creative solutions (Blanton & Pugach, 2011).

Faculty representing each group must meet the accreditation standards of their respective national specialized professional associations (SPA) in order to then prepare a proposed dual certification program to meet Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation standards and, consequently, be eligible for national accreditation and recognition. In addition to co-programming to meet national SPA requirements, involved faculty also must consider teacher competencies and guidelines for each respective discipline as outlined in their state department of education. All of this must be completed while adhering to strict guidelines as to the number of credit hours allowed in a program offering per university

regulations. Theoretical and practical synergy must emerge as pedagogical priorities are discussed and agreed upon. Consequently, agreements require creative problem-solving and programmatic concessions from both disciplines and multiple administrations. Time, planning, reflection, concessions, and diligence are necessary components to preparing a dual certification program planning team. It should be noted that through this critical lens, Dewey (1938) predicted the difficulty of such a feat as to change the static structure of our current teacher education system when he noted that pushing schools in a positive direction in terms of selecting appropriate methods is required but is a "slow and arduous" (p. 30) process.

Modeling. Dewey contended that learning in a community with others enriches the learning experience. In addition to co-planning that occurs as a result of the increased need for dual certification programs in teacher education, using co-teaching as a modeling strategy in teacher preparation programs is also highly effective (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2008; Patel & Herick, 2010). Pre-service teachers report they believe they will be expected to participate in co-teaching teams when they enter the P-12 classroom (Bacharach, Heck, & Dahlberg, 2008). Observing faculty negotiate conflict and collaboratively present content and experiences provides a model of teaching and professionalism for the pre-service teacher to reflect upon when entering the profession.

Conclusion: Deweyan Philosophy in Special Education

Researchers suggest that of the six million students with disabilities served in special education, almost 80% spend the majority of their day in a regular education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2012b). Gehrke and Cocchiarella (2013) noted that as a result of trends pushing for inclusive classrooms, general education teachers must be prepared to teach students in a variety of contexts and from a variety of backgrounds and abilities. General education teachers must demonstrate the ability to improve student learning for all students. Inclusive education practices are necessary for social justice to become a reality for all students (Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rostenberg, 2006). As Obiakor (2011) suggested, social justice is at the heart of inclusion because it stands in opposition to exclusion. Public education is one of the few arenas in American society where the hope of equity and the prospects of societal advancement may be realized by all of our children. It is the proving ground for optimism and the opportunity for all students to become productive members of society.

As stated at the beginning of the article, the authors posited that

Dewey (1897, 1916, & 1938) would embrace all children in an inclusive education system that never delineates normal from different. Moreover, had Dewey been born a few decades later, education and educator preparation would include a focus on all children regardless of difference, and educators would differentiate based on each student's strengths and needs. Certainly, hints of an inclusionary education are shadowed throughout his inspirational work, *Democracy and Education*. One can easily see how Chapter Eight of *Democracy and Education*, "Aims in Education," provides a template for the modern Individualized Education Plan (IEP) used in special education. Furthermore, when Dewey revisited his philosophy of education in *Experience and Education* (1938), he suggested, "only when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth does it answer to the criterion of education as growing" (p. 36). As inclusive environments are not only educative to the psychological selves of students with exceptionalities, these environments are also continuously educative to the sociological selves of all students. The authors believe that today's principles and ideals of special education meet Dewey's (1938) criteria for a growing educative process.

Dewey (1938) also noted that while experiences have the opportunity to be educative, as inclusion is meant to be, there is also the opportunity for experiences to be mis-educative. The greatest difficulty for achieving full inclusion for students with disabilities is the lack of training received by regular educators in their teacher preparation programs. Traditional teacher preparation programs usually require the completion of 120 credits within a four year undergraduate program. The majority of programs offer one sole course covering a vast range of topics such as: recognizing the characteristics of students with learning or behavior differences, recognizing the legal requirements concerning special education, and identifying which modifications to make in the classroom. Researchers discovered that teacher preparation programs struggle to allocate sufficient time to additional courses regarding the education of those needing a differentiated curriculum, providing positive behavioral supports, or understanding the Response to Intervention (RtI) model of intervention (Bowlin, 2012; Forlin, 2010; Gehrke & Cocchiarella, 2013; Obiakor, 2011).

Courses in teacher preparation programs focusing on characteristics of learners with difference or differentiation of curriculum are commonly taught separately from other core education courses and by faculty in the special education department, rather than demonstrating for students a truly inclusive view of education whereby the topics would be integrated throughout coursework and co-taught by faculty members. This leads to perpetuating stereotypes which embed the notion of a dichotomous

education system for those in regular and/or special education. Collaboration in university classrooms then is viewed as a theory rather than a pragmatic model of learning. Teachers then go into their first years of teaching and discover they are responsible for the education of students with exceptionalities who are included in the general education setting. Dewey (1938) would have seen this as a lack in continuity of experience. As “every experience influences in some degree the objective conditions under which further experiences are had” (p.36). It is troublesome, to say the least, that teacher preparation programs could be setting new teachers up for negative and outdated perceptions of special education.

The authors feel strongly that Dewey (1897, 1916, & 1938) would agree: there should not be a dichotomous education track in traditional K-12 education nor in teacher education programs. Instead, as clearly evident in *Democracy and Education*, there should be one system where educators have the ability to differentiate for all learners. This would be a natural consequence of their similar experiences in higher education teacher education, and thus truly ensure social justice and an equitable and democratic education for all children.

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