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Fostering Democratic Values in Inclusive Early Childhood Settings

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INTRODUCTION

What is democracy? In a democratic society people are given the power to make a variety of meaningful choices pertaining to their daily lives. The freedom to make these choices is what gives people a strong sense of empowerment. This *freedom* is extremely important in the role of education. John Dewey (1938), the noted scholar on education, described the vital importance of freedom in educational practices.

> Enforced quiet and acquiescence prevent pupils from disclosing their real natures. They enforce artificial uniformity. They put seeming before being. They place a premium upon preserving the outward appearance of attention, decorum, and obedience. And everyone who is acquainted with schools in which this system prevailed well knows that thoughts, imaginations, desires, and sly activities ran their own unchecked course behind this facade. (p. 62)

Settings in which passivity and conformity are valued are not appropriate for young children who need to learn about the world by actively exploring, experimenting, discovering, and creating.

THE ROLE OF DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION

The goal of democracy in early education is parallel to that of the government. Democracy in education results in a sense of empowerment by the children. The freedom to make meaningful choices regarding their daily lives and future helps to improve children's self-esteem by naturally fostering a feeling of competence and independence (Erwin, 1994). Too often, well-meaning professionals make decisions for their students without actively involving them. For example, early childhood teachers may find it more expedient to serve one thing only for snack or carry out a teacher-directed art activity than to give choices resulting in a variety of child responses. Unfortunately the message the teacher may be giving the class is that the students are not capable of making their own decisions or what they want is not very important.

If democracy means empowering people to make meaningful decisions, then democracy in early childhood education should result in a similar empowerment of young children. Three ways to empower youngsters have been described by Hendrick (1992) including: (1) the power to make decisions, (2) the power to try, and (3) the power to do.

Hendrick suggested that the power for children to make decisions occurs throughout the day when teachers present choices and honor their decisions. An example would be to give children a choice of what to make during art and then allowing them to do it their own way. In this way children gain confidence in their own abilities. The power to try means allowing children to be independent by supporting their attempts to try to do things for and by themselves (i.e., dressing themselves even though it would be faster for an adult to do it). The power to do includes skill acquisition and mastery by encouraging children to feel good about their accomplishments (i.e., knowing how to use utensils or when to blow their noses). When children feel competent in what they can do, they do not have to rely on others to build their confidence or to realize a sense of accomplishment.

The role of the adult is vital in organizing the early childhood environment as well as the curriculum so that children are participating in a meaningful, individualized, and active way. Democratic classrooms can be characterized as those where frequent opportunities are provided for children to decide what, where, when, and with whom they want to play, work, or relax.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF DEMOCRACY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

A discussion of democracy in education would not be complete without acknowledging John Dewey, who was a major contributor to the field of education particularly his work on democracy. Dewey (1944) believed that education should be tailored to meet each child's unique abilities, and that children should be provided with necessary tools and skills to promote their individual growth and development. Furthermore, he advocated that children must be active participants in an environment that fosters imagination, exploration, and interpersonal interactions.

The need to use a democratic approach in early childhood is vital. Democracy in early care and education reflects the value that young children can be trusted to make decisions about their own lives. This belief is instrumental in building both self-confidence and skill competence which are essential for all children, particularly young children with disabilities. Given the growing interest in the value of educating young children with disabilities in community-based environments with their typical peers (also known as inclusion), there is an even greater need to promote understanding of and acceptance among children.

In addition to learning about themselves through a democratic approach, children learn first-hand about social and group dynamics. There are many natural opportunities throughout the day for children to gain an understanding about community spirit and membership. For example, youngsters may experience working together as a group to reach a common goal or realizing through collaborative problem solving that every member of a classroom has an important contribution to make and a unique voice to share. Greenberg (1992) characterized the true spirit of democracy in early childhood environments: "The essence of democracy is inclusiveness —everyone is to be recognized (politically and otherwise), utilized (everyone can contribute something to the whole), and rewarded (with the fruits of their labors, the blessings of continuing opportunity, and the gratitude of the group)" (p. 54).

Using a democratic approach in early childhood settings, particularly inclusive classrooms where there might be a diverse assortment of children, can produce numerous benefits for youngsters with and without disabilities. For a description of these benefits refer to Table I.

Because children learn so much by example, teachers need to be aware of their own behavior, particularly their interactions with others. Benefits of a democratic approach are abundant, thus, practitioners need to integrate systematically the principles of democracy into naturally occurring routines and activities. Table II provides practical suggestions for incorporating democratic practices into inclusive early childhood classrooms.

A democratic early childhood setting is one in which all students, with various abilities, backgrounds, and talents are truly included. It is understood implicitly that each member of the classroom community is valued because every child has a uniqueness that is recognized, understood, and honored. This is especially relevant when considering young children with disabilities since they may not contribute or respond in ways that are consistent with the rest of the group. A democratic approach, therefore, is not only sensitive to children's individual styles, but is responsive to and encourages their diversity.

Table I. Benefits to Using a Democratic Approach in Early Childhood

Children can acquire the ability to:

1) Trust themselves by believing in their own ability to make meaningful decisions.
2) Learn to trust others.
3) Assume responsibility for their own actions.
4) Acknowledge their own value by learning that their opinions count.
5) Build skill competence and independence.
6) Respect authority.
7) Discover and treasure their own gifts and talents as well as the gifts and talents of others.
8) Understand that diversity is to be celebrated.
9) Respect themselves and others.
10) Value a sense of community membership and loyalty within a social group.

IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Although children with disabilities are quite diverse, they share with their nondisabled peers the same need for shelter, rest, nourishment, security, and love (Wolery, Strain, & Bailey 1992). In other words, children with disabilities are children first, and they have individual needs, preferences, and talents as all children do. Children with disabilities need to make meaningful choices in their daily lives just as typically developing children do. Thus, a democratic approach in early childhood education must apply to all children, regardless of their ability.

Although children with disabilities may require curriculum, environmental, or instructional adaptations, one of the underlying principles of democracy is that each individual has a right to be heard and to contribute.

Table II. Suggestions for Promoting Democracy in Inclusive Early Childhood Environments

SUGGESTIONS	EXAMPLES	IMPLICATIONS
Allow class to make important decisions that affect the whole group	"It's raining out and we cannot go to the park right now. What could we do instead of going to the park?"	Children learn that the teacher values the group's decision. They experience the process of group decision making (i.e., majority rules or there are many available options to choose from).
Encourage children to address real challenges by problem solving and negotiating.	"We do not have enough apples for the whole class for snack. Let's try to figure out what to do about this."	Children gain first hand experience and accountability for resolving real life issues. Negotiation skills and collaboration are fostered.
Teach children to respect uniqueness and appreciate commonality.	"Kim is eating rice with chop sticks and George is eating rice with a spoon. There are different ways of eating rice!"	Children learn to recognize differences and similarities among people and to value diversity.
Assist children in assuming responsibility for the classroom environment.	"Thank you Derek and Jill for making and passing out snack today. After we clean the table, maybe we can water our plants so they stay healthy."	Children learn to take pride in their environment and be held accountable for it.
Respect children's right to decide how they want to spend their time and with whom.	"It looks like Jackson, Alyssa, Emma, and Harrison have chosen to spend their play time together building a castle."	Children build competence in making decisions by learning that they have control over their lives.
Encourage children to try to do things independently even if they might have difficulty.	"I know you will figure out how to put the brake on your wheelchair. Then maybe you can teach me how to do it."	Children learn that adults trust their competence and respect their right to learn.
Teach children that others also have rights.	"It's not fair to knock over Jocelyn's blocks. Her choice was to continue building an airplane. What could we do to help Jocelyn?"	Children learn that there are social rules to abide by and that others have a right to make their own choices and decisions.

Likewise, the need for an individually appropriate framework is clearly articulated in the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) guidelines which recognize that "each child is a unique person with an individual pattern and timing of growth, as well as individual personality, learning style, and family background" (Bredekamp, 1991, p. 2). The need for individually appropriate practices in early childhood care and education are paramount to the healthy growth and development of infants, toddlers, and young children.

Wolery and Bredekamp (1994) suggested that when

determining the appropriateness of any practice for youngsters with disabilities, the following five elements must be considered carefully:

(1) *Appropriateness:* the extent to which practices are meaningful and beneficial to the child and family, and if the practices are consistent with recommended practices in early care and education.

(2) *Effectiveness:* the capacity of the practices to result in observable and appropriate outcomes for children.

(3) *Efficiency:* the relative speed in which children acquire skills that foster their growth and development, inhibit secondary handicaps, and promote their autonomy.

(4) *Dependence:* the extent to which changes in children's growth and development can be associated with the child's educational program and services.

(5) *Social Validity:* extent to which the family values and accepts the goals, practices, and anticipated and observable outcomes of the early education program.

While these considerations can serve as a beginning point for identifying appropriate practices for young children with disabilities, Johnson and Johnson further (1994) asserted that these components should be viewed as a "means to an end, not an end in themselves. The end is generalization (i.e., stability and durability of learning/development) and normalization (i.e., individually optimal participation in our democratic ways of life)" (p. 345). It appears that embedding democratic principles into early childhood classroom practices is a logical and natural approach for young children with *and* without disabilities.

There are many ways of including children with varying abilities and learning styles when using a democratic approach. For example, a child who uses a communication board to express her preferences and desires would be given ample opportunity to indicate her choice of with what or whom she would like to play by using the symbols on her board. Likewise, during a class vote the teacher might encourage the child with visual impairments to touch all the raised hands so he could count the number of children indicating a certain response. One of the keys to embedding a democratic philosophy into *any* early childhood setting is the belief that everyone has a valuable contribution to make. When this assumption is strongly recognized and supported, then creating natural opportunities for all children to make meaningful contributions and decisions is possible.

SUMMARY

Democracy in early childhood can best be understood as a value. This value reflects the belief that all the members of a particular community are viewed as important, capable, and competent. The true essence of democracy lies in building community spirit that honors every child's right to be heard, even if the voices do not sound the same.

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