THE JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER & VALUES

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Inclusive education, democracy and justice

Ólafur Páll Jónsson

December, 2012

School of Education
University of Birmingham
Edgbastion
Birmingham

Inclusive education, democracy and justice

Ólafur Páll Jónsson
University of Iceland, School of Education

'Inclusive education' and 'democracy' are more than buzz words in education. They refer to official educational policy in much of the western world. Democracy as a school policy seems to be widely accepted but, in Iceland at least, inclusive education is very controversial, fuelling a lively public debate where parents and politicians are vocal. However, there seems to be little agreement - and, I would add, lack of understanding - of what 'inclusive education' means and what it is for a school to be democratic. Still, one can discern a certain core to the understanding of both 'inclusive education' and 'democracy' among many of those who are vocal in the public debate. I am not sure how to refer to this understanding. Some might use the adjective 'instrumental', others might prefer 'neo-liberal' or simply 'individualistic' and yet others opt for 'medical'. These adjectives do not capture adequately what is at issue although all of them have something going for them. First, much of the discussion of inclusive education operates *from* (not only *with*) a vocabulary of various learning difficulties, mental and physical defects, social and emotional disturbances etc. (thus 'medical'). It also views difficulties that students face as *their* difficulties, although those difficulties often result in a problem for the teachers involved and the schools themselves (thus 'individualistic'). Furthermore, in order to address the problems what is seen to be needed are the appropriate methods or technique (thus 'technical'). All this is then set against a background condition of schools where students compete with each other for rank and opportunity in a kind of market environment (thus 'neo-liberal').

Somewhat similar things can be said about democracy. It makes individual preferences its ultimate unit of analysis (thus 'individualistic'), it is thought to revolve around structure and formal procedures (thus 'technical') and its basic function is thought to regulate a free competition of individual ideas and preferences (thus 'neo-liberal').

Debates about inclusive education initiated by friends of the above conception tend to focus primarily on distribution of limited resources as welfare provisions; a system of aid for specific groups of students, rather

than things that are owed the individuals as matters of basic rights. This runs contrary to recent and not so recent trends exemplified by, for instance, the Salamanca declaration from 1994 and more recently by the *World Report on Disability* from last year (WHO, 2011). It also runs contrary to much of recent academic work in the field of inclusive education (Slee, 2011, Allan, 2003, 2008).

Central to the above understanding of inclusive education and democracy is, first, that these are distinct fields and, second, that neither field has much to do with character, virtue, values or other moral qualities. These become relevant, in the case of democracy, simply as fixed preconditions for the appropriate systems and procedures. Moreover, much of what one might call "the dominant ideology of schools" supports important elements in the above conceptions of inclusive education and democracy. But neither conception is acceptable. I shall argue that acceptable concepts of inclusive education and democracy must place individual character, values and virtues at the centre, giving rise to what one might call character education in the wide sense of education that promotes the development of virtuous character as part of the good life. This contrast sharply with the dominant views of inclusion and democracy which by and large views preferences and values as unchanging preconditions and not as fundamental defining concepts.[1]

Different ideologies of schools and education

Considering inclusive education as an essentially democratic requirement that ought to permeate the entire school practices means that inclusion must be taken as a fundamental value, both political and educational. And here one encounters differences among teachers, parents and scholars alike, that are both deeply rooted and with widespread implications. The differences are not simply about the effectiveness of certain methods or some practical matters but are best described as ideological differences about education and schooling in general. And as with any other ideology, it may be difficult to articulate or even recognize as such. The conflict

[1] One peculiar difficulty in coming up with a viable notion of democracy and inclusion for schools, and education in general, is the remarkable divide between theorizing in the field of education on the one hand and politics on the other. Furthermore, in so far as teachers explicitly work from a conception of democracy or inclusion they usually work from a thin formal conception that has little relevance for most of what goes on in schools. There are, of course, exceptions from this, both among individual teachers and scholars (Biesta, 2006). But they are rare. Even philosophers like Amy Gutmann who writes both on education and democratic theory, keeps the two remarkably separate (see e.g. Gutmann and Thompson, 2004 which has no reference to education).

emerges as frustration and, when things are at their worst, it turns schools into a territory of failure (Allan, 2008).

Dominant ideology is a collection of ideas, prejudice and conceptions of the world in virtue of which people look at and think about society, social institutions, their surroundings, other people, and themselves. Ideology in this sense is not expressed explicitly, neither by certain individuals nor by a group of people. It is exemplified by what people do and say, and what they don't do and don't say. It is also implicit in the institutional structures that we find in society, not least in schools (Zizek, 1997). And it is shown by what is counted as normal functioning of those institutions. Ideology in this sense is not something people deliberately accept nor is it supported by arguments, for it is not in need of such a support. Dominant ideology constitutes, at any time, the obvious – it is what is taken to be common sense – though in retrospect it is often all but that.

Conceiving of the frustrations in the field of inclusive education as a conflict of ideologies echoes some recent trends in the field of inclusive education. In an editorial to a special issue of the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* from 2008, David J. Connor et al. describe recent trends in the field of disability studies:

> Gabel & Peters (2004) acknowledged that the social model is explanatory, but insufficient for creating change. To move forward, they suggested the use of resistance theory to comprehend the intricate and multifaceted relationships, interactions, and negotiations among divergent ideas, while simultaneously bringing together the global community in pursuit of praxis. (Connor et al., 2008, p. 443)

Though Gabel and Peters (2004) do not describe their approach in terms of conflicting ideologies – and sometimes may narrow the focus too much by using the word 'paradigm' – they come close. Thus, they write:

> Thinking of resistance in this way, as operating in all directions of the social sphere and across paradigmatic boundaries, helps one to understand the push and pull of the conversation of resistance. Resistance functions as a way for disabled people to push against dominance while also attempting to pull society into disabled people's way of seeing. (Gabel & Peters, 2004, p. 594-595)

A reconsideration, or simply a consideration, of inclusive educational practices will derive from the wider perspective of ideology in the above sense. The conflict – the push against dominance and pull towards new way of seeing – are not nuances between competing demands of specific students or teachers, but a conflict of ideas about what counts as normal working of

a school. Recent trends in inclusive education have emphasised human diversity and the demands of justice and democracy in general, and not only for disabled students, but also for the very bright ones, the non-native speaking ones, the poor, and the very shy ones, etc.

Inclusion and democracy

Different conceptions of democracy not only entail different *roles* for schools as institutions in a just democratic society, they also entail different conceptions of what makes *school practices* democratic.

An underlying idea in the conception of democracy that I described briefly at the outset is that social affairs should be organized as a free and open competition among people for preferences, positions, and various other social as well as personal goods. It is granted that people have different views, different needs and different preferences, and to accommodate this diversity democratic institutions are designed to ensure a free market of ideas and opinions and competition in this market that it is free of coercion and monopoly. This conception of democracy is often called "aggregative democracy" (Young, 2002, pp. 18-22) but I prefer the heading "the market view of democracy".

The democratic role of the school, with regards to this view, is mainly twofold. First, it is to make people fit to participate in the market of ideas, and second to ensure knowledge of fundamental rights and basic principles that are needed for society to function efficiently. On this view, the role of the school is to *prepare* students for a society to which they do not yet belong, in much the same way as the school serves to prepare students for the workplace. Democracy is, according to this view, a task for the schools, even a problem; it is something that schools face and should try to solve however successfully just as the schools should produce knowledgeable and skilled workers for the workplace (Biesta 2006). Democracy as a problem for schools may be impossible to solve as Keith Ballard observes drawing on work by Paul James:

> James (1994) says that in the fragmented, individualized and globalized world of New Right liberal economics, the 'sociality of identity' is being lost (p. 3). In part, this is because the concept of a society is challenged, and replaced with the idea that only the 'personal and familial' (p. 3) has meaning. In this context, rather than recognizing and valuing our dependencies and interdependencies, which would seem to be central to the notion of an inclusive society, the term dependent is constructed as involving a 'lesser person,' one who cannot, or will not, fend for themselves (James, 1994, p. 3). This position supports only limited connections between and amongst people in communities and societies. (Ballard, 2003, p. 11)

Democratic characters

The market view of democracy is often contrasted with deliberative conceptions. Early formulations were inspired by John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas (Bohman and Rehg, 1997). Most theories of deliberative democracy focus primarily on structure and policy and on the making of collective decisions, premissed on the mutual benefit of people who live together as equals and who have joined forces in a free association (Cohen, 1997; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004). Proceeding from these kinds of premisses, one faces difficult problems when applying a theory of deliberative democracy in schools where (*a*) the individuals involved do not come together as equals but as unequal in important respects (teacher /student, headmaster/teacher, headmaster/ student), (*b*) are not there for mutual benefit, and (*c*) part of the population, namely the students, has no choice but participating independently of whether life within the boundaries of the school has any meaning at all.

What is missing is an account of the role of attitudes and practices that are essential for sustaining and cultivating just and democratic functioning while, at the same time, being central for transforming the school into a truly educational setting. Such a concept of democracy and education was argued for, at length, by John Dewey during the first decades of the 20th century (Dewey, 1916). Despite important similarities between Dewey's conception and the deliberative tradition, there are also important differences most important of which have to do with Dewey's starting point. In a speech from 1939, "Creative democracy - the task before us" he writes:

> Instead of thinking of our own [democratic] dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projections and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes. (Dewey, 1998 [1939], p. 341)

The common way of applying democracy to schools or school practices, is to begin with a notion of democracy as a system of government or means of making binding decisions, and then adapt it to the circumstances at hand. Dewey, on the other hand, insists that the starting point is not a theory of institutional structure or procedural means of making binding decisions, but "habitually dominant personal attitudes".

Although Dewey places as much importance on reason giving and deliberation, he places even more importance on learning as part of democratic process emphasizing certain emotional aspects as a precondition for it. To quote Dewey:

> [...] democracy as a way of life is controlled by personal faith in

> personal day-by-day working together with others. Democracy is the belief that even when needs and ends or consequences are different for each individual, the habit of amicable cooperation - which may include, as in sport, rivalry and competition - is itself a priceless addition to life. To take as far as possible every conflict which arises-and they are bound to arise-out of the atmosphere and medium of force, of violence as a means of settlement into that of discussion and of intelligence is to treat those who disagree - even profoundly - with us as those from whom we may learn, and in so far, as friends. (Dewey, 1998 [1939], p. 342)

It is instructive to see Dewey describing democracy not as a way of managing differences - or providing a way of making decisions in face of differences - but as a way of living with other people with whom one may disagree. Fundamental to the democratic way of living is the ability to approach other people not only rationally but also emotionally - as friends, as he says, and as people from whom one may learn. Thus Dewey thought of democracy as rooted in personal attitudes and habits - democratic character or moral virtue, one could say - arguing that institutions are democratic only in so far as they can be seen, in their day to day functionings, as being projections of democratic character.

Dewey may overstate the point when using the word ‘friend’, since from the perspective of society, friendship as a basis for democracy is too strong a demand. However, we can still maintain his insight for what is needed is not friendship but *respect*. The point is not simply that respect will make society better, but that without respect for each other the social relations among the citizens will mainly be economic in nature, politics will be cast into a competitive mould and democratic living will be a struggle - a fight for one’s own interests - and not a life of mutual learning among people.

Central to most contemporary thinking about democracy and justice is an acceptance of pluralism and a rejection of independent authority on moral and political issues. Rawls makes what he calls “reasonable pluralism” the starting point of his theorizing about justice (Rawls, 2001). Sen (1992) and Nussbaum (2006) go even further in their insistence on the acceptance of profound diversity, not only in opinions and philosophies of life but also in capabilities. The French philosopher Chantal Mouffe (2000) goes further still in insisting that theorizing about democracy and justice must not only accept pluralism and diversity but has to recognize actual disagreements and conflicts as a basic social condition. A theory of democracy is, according to her, a theory about how to live justly in a society that is marked by such social realities. I think she is right, and I also think that any such theory must include within its scope an account

of personal, democratic attitudes in much the same way as Dewey argues for (Dewey, 1916; 1998 [1939]) .

Concluding remarks

Schools are still predominantly authoritarian. Disabled students are often not included, but the same may be said about students quite generally for they are often not included except in a most superficial way; little space is devoted to talking to them, rarely do the issues for discussion originate among them, and little emphasis is on reflective interaction among students (Hess, 2009). The dominant ideology of schools is still that of providing students with predetermined skills and a fixed body of knowledge – or rather a fixed body of information – subjecting them to unquestionable authority rather than engaging their moral and aesthetic abilities, and preparing them for something to come rather than seeing what is actually going on as part of a whole life.

The normal students may be able to cope with the system and meet its requirements, but they are given little opportunity to influence the work, to contribute to the formation or transformation of values and goals, and to exercise their own critical and creative abilities. Their inclusion in the process of education is, therefore, very shallow – or simply nominal. Regard for diversity, let alone commitment to it, is largely a matter of coincidence and often absent in the contemporary compulsory schools.

Understanding democracy and inclusion along these lines of Dewey makes inclusive education essentially a branch of character education – but character education that has to begin with the democratic character of the teachers themselves.

References

Allan, J. (2008). *Rethinking inclusive education: The philosophers of difference in practice*. Dordrecht: Springer.

Allan, J. (ed). (2003). *Inclusion, participation and democracy: What is the purpose?* Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Ballard, K. (2003). Including ourselves: Teaching, trust, identity and community. In: J. Allan (Ed.) *Inclusion, participation and democracy: What is the purpose?* London: Kluwer.

Biesta, G.J.J. (2006). *Beyond learning. Democratic education for a human future.* Boulder CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Bohman, J. and Rehg, W. (1997). *Deliberative democracy*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Cohen, J. (1997). Deliberation and democratic legitimacy. In J. Bohman and W. Rehg (Eds.) *Deliberative democracy*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Connor, D.J., Gabel , S.L., Gallagher, D.J. and Morton, M. (2008).

Disability studies and inclusive education – implications for theory, research, and practice. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 12*(5-6), 441-457.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York NY: MacMillan.

Dewey, J. (1998 [1939]). Creative democracy - The task before us. In L.A. Hickman & T.M. Alexander (Eds.) *The essential Dewey*, Vol. I. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Gabel, S. L. & Peters, S. (2004). Pressage of a paradigm shift? Beyond the social model of disability toward resistance theories of disability, *Disability and Society, 19*, 585-600.

Gutmann, A. & Thompson, D. (2004). *Why deliberative democracy?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Habermas, J. (1996). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Hess, D. E. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion*. London: Routledge.

Mouffe, C. (2000). *Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism*. Vienna: Institute for advanced studies.

Nussbaum, M. (2006). *Frontiers of justice: Disability, nationality and species membership*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Rawls, J. (2001). *Justice as fairness*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Salamanca statement and framework for action on special needs education. (1994). Salamanca, June 7-10.

Sen, A. (1992). *Inequality reexamined*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Slee, R. (2011). *The irregular school. Exclusion, schooling and inclusive education*. London: Routledge.

UPIAS. (1976). *Fundamental principles of disability*. London: Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation.

WHO. (2011). *World report on disability*. Geneva: WHO Press.

Young, I.M. (2002). *Inclusion and democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zizek, Slavoj. (1997). *The plague of fantasie*s. London: Verso.