

## Equality and Inclusion: Creating a Communitarian Environment

Michelle Kraft

### Abstract

*As knowledge of disability has changed over time, so too has the concept of equality. At the highest level of equality, interdependence is emphasized over individual independence in an effort to create a community in which all members have opportunity for contribution and active participation, as envisioned by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Here, I examine the various levels of equality as they relate to the philosophy and intent of IDEA. I then investigate implications for the art class as it provides for a unique, participatory environment for learners experiencing disabilities, and I offer strategies for creating an environment that allows all learners to actively contribute in their art making and learning.*

The concept of equality has continued to evolve as our understanding of differences, such as disability, has evolved. As a fledgling high school art teacher in the early 1990's, I did not connect my implementation of inclusion policy to the philosophy behind the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). I simply tried to provide students experiencing disabilities<sup>1</sup> in my art class with the most normative art experiences possible. It did not occur to me until years later that the special education mandate was actually civil rights legislation and that the concept of equality was at its heart. Equality was the driving force in the landmark court decisions (*Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children [PARC] v. Commonwealth*, 1972; *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia*, 1972) that provided access to free public education for students experiencing disabilities and laid the groundwork for IDEA. Current notions of equality, though, go beyond this early form of "equality as access." In this paper, I survey the various levels of equality in education then examine the concept of equality in IDEA, as well as the construction of the inclusive art class as an environment that fosters communitarian equality and active participation for all students, regardless of ability or disability.

### Levels of Equality in Education

Duquette (1990) and Howe (1993) maintain that equal access to foundational services and programs is essential in the educational system in that this is often the beginning of a chain effect that opens the door to future opportunities. An individual's ability to access educational opportunity directly affects his or her ability to take advantage of future opportunities.

Early notions of educational equality emphasized equal access

(Howe, 1993). This equality-as-access model, which Hahn (1997) calls "impartial equality," ignores difference and "requires only the absence of formal (especially legal) barriers to participation" (p. 329). The *PARC* (1972) and *Mills* (1972) cases, for instance, removed legal barriers to public education for particular students with disabilities. But the equality-as-access model, while promoting some form of equality, is less than ideal in that, while it makes the playing field accessible, it may not make it level.

A higher level of equality is what Howe (1993) refers to as "compensatory" equality. This level of equality recognizes differences in needs and adjusts accordingly to meet those needs; the distinction here is in "treatment as an equal" rather than "equal treatment" (Howe, 1993, p. 330). Silvers (1995), though, points out that there is often the implication that those experiencing disabilities are only equal by virtue of fiction, stating that the perception is that "they really don't possess the essentially humanizing capacity to fulfill their potential 'normally'" (p. 35). This compensatory model of equality, then, becomes a favor extended to those experiencing disabilities to somehow make up for their inability to function in society in what the majority might regard as a productive way. Turnbull (1991) and Howe (1993) hold that the ideal of equality must go beyond this mere accommodation.

### **Communitarian Interpretation of Equality**

Turnbull's (1991) "communitarian" model of equality—which Howe (1993) calls "participatory" equality—fills in the gaps of the compensatory model of equality. This communitarian interpretation of equality respects all humanity—regardless of ability or disability—and advocates a change in thinking that emphasizes *interdependence* of people within a community over *independence* (Turnbull, 1991). This holds true for the educational or class community, which—as a microcosm of society—might be the first place where communitarian equality may be practiced.

In the class community, this form of equality recognizes the mutual contributions, needs, and interdependence of all members. Equality is not an absolute under the communitarian model but is, instead, relative to an individual's needs and provided for out of mutual respect for all members of the community. Members of the (class) community recognize that everyone has contributions to make and, therefore, value input and choices of all participants because the involvement of everyone is necessary within a true community context. Under this model, students of all ability levels are empowered to actively participate in an education environment and process that is enabling and maximizes self-realization.

### **Communitarian Equality and IDEA**

While earlier special education legislation reveals equality-as-access

and compensatory equality interpretations (Kraft, 2001), the 1997 Amendments to IDEA point to Congress' communitarian view of equality in the statement:

Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities. (20 U.S.C. § 1400)

Here, Congress emphasizes the individual's "full participation" in the community, which includes (as this is indeed special education legislation) the classroom community.

This emphasis on full participation in and contribution to society is echoed in the IDEA federal regulations, which describe the philosophy of independent living as inclusive of the concepts of

Consumer control, peer support, self-help, self-determination, equal access, and individual and system advocacy, in order to maximize the leadership, empowerment, independence, and productivity of individuals with disabilities, and the integration and full inclusion of individuals with disabilities into the mainstream of American society. (34 C.F.R. Part 300, App. A)

It is clear, in examining the special education mandate and its accompanying regulations, that Congress intends for the student experiencing disabilities to fully and actively participate in his/her education -- to the greatest extent possible -- in preparation for future self-advocacy and contribution to society. Congress does note, though, that some students "require significant levels of support to maximize their participation and learning" (20 U.S.C. § 1451(a)(6)(A)(D)).

### **Communitarian Equality and Inclusion: Implications for the Art Class**

Schiller (1999) posits that the art class, because it is considered a "nonacademic" setting, is often one of the first places in which inclusion is tested for a student experiencing disabilities. Likewise, Guay (1993) and Pappalardo (1999) point out the unique benefits art offers to students with special needs, including opportunities for verbal and visual expression, development of self-worth and self-esteem, and the ability of art to improve understanding in other disciplines.

In spite of its potential as an inclusive environment that fosters communitarian equality, the art class may not always provide for inclusion that aligns with the intent and philosophy of IDEA. One case study (Kraft, 2001)

revealed that, for a student experiencing autism and who was primarily non-verbal, the art class did not always provide opportunity for active participation in learning. It was clear that this student's "typical" peers viewed him as an oddity rather than a contributing member to the art class, and his peer interactions were limited largely to students from his special education class who were also included in the art class. While there were instances when the student made specific choices regarding his art making, there were others in which he did not as actively participate in his learning (i.e., when the instructional aide would tell him exactly, step-by-step, how to complete a project).

In this student's case, one barrier to communitarian equality was the employment of an inclusion-as-proximity model in which the student's presence in the art class seemingly constituted his inclusion. A second barrier for this student's active participation in the class community was the focused presence of the instructional aide. While she was at the student's side, neither peers nor art teacher interacted as readily with him. A third barrier was the lack of collaborative opportunities between the art teacher, the special educator, and the instructional aide. Allowance for this type of collaboration would have provided for discussion and development of strategies that combined considerations of subject matter and art activities, student ability and disability, and student preferences and personality in order to best serve his particular special educational needs in the art class. While these barriers emerged from the study of a particular art class, they are not unique to this one setting and support similar findings in other studies related to inclusion in general and art class environments (Bartlett & McLeod, 1998; Cates, McGill, Wilder, & Androes, 1990; Gelzheiser, McLane, Meyers, & Pruzek, 1997; Ripley, 1997; Witten, 1991).

### **Strategies for Creating the Communitarian Environment**

A number of strategies would facilitate the construction of the communitarian art class environment. It is noteworthy that, without adopting a communitarian perspective of equality, these strategies will not operate as an outgrowth of respect for all individuals and will not extend past the compensatory level of equality. Stopping at the compensatory level of equality undermines IDEA's efforts to prepare the individual experiencing disabilities for an actively participatory role in society. Under the communitarian model of equality, these strategies enable all learners to contribute to the class community, thereby preparing them for future contribution to a diverse community-at-large. These strategies for promoting a communitarian art class environment include the following:

*Art teacher involvement in the IEP process.* The art educator must be involved in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) planning process. While IDEA mandates the involvement of at least one general educator as a

member of the IEP team (provided that the student is educated in the general classroom setting), school administrators must make every effort to include all teachers in the planning process who will be working with a particular student. Such involvement aids in the teacher's understanding of a student's special educational needs and provides the teacher opportunity for input in meeting those needs in the unique art class environment.

*Collaboration between art and special educators.* Art and special educators must collaborate to provide for the special educational needs of the student experiencing disabilities, and school administration must facilitate and encourage this collaboration. Likewise, special educators must share proven instructional strategies with art educators, especially those that are helpful in working with students with moderate to severe disabilities, such as task analysis and cue hierarchy. Collaboration allows the educators to address both content-area and individuated teaching strategies that enable the student to actively participate in the art class community.

*Increased opportunities for stakeholder communication.* Communication among stakeholders is key, and both special and art educators must communicate with the parents or guardians of students experiencing disabilities. In this way, parents are able to share valuable input concerning their children's abilities and disabilities from which educators may develop instructional strategies.

*Facilitation of peer interaction in the art class.* Art educators must utilize activities that foster peer interaction between students experiencing disabilities and nondisabled students. These activities should allow students to interact with individuals who are different from themselves and should cultivate mutual respect for those differences. Teachers may also model a communitarian perspective for their students by demonstrating themselves to be respectful of students' roles and abilities to contribute in the class community.

*Art making as choice making.* All students must be empowered to make choices regarding their art making. In allowing students to do so, the art educator provides students a participatory role in their learning and fosters critical thinking and responsibility, empowering them to live more independently as envisioned by IDEA.

### **HEARTS: A Model for a Communitarian Art Class**

While the above strategies are directed at practicing art educators and their classes, the importance of pre-service opportunities to work with students experiencing disabilities in an art setting cannot be overemphasized. One model for facilitating these pre-service opportunities is found in the Human Empowerment through the ARTS (HEARTS) program (Keifer-Boyd & Kraft, in-press). In this program, embedded within a course on inclusion

in the art class, our students taught individuals experiencing moderate to severe disabilities, along with "typical" students, in inclusive art class settings. Our "student-teachers" developed the HEARTS mission statement and lessons in clay, painting, mosaics, and technology that employed multi-modal approaches in order to meet a variety of educational needs. Guided by national standards for art education, we developed a communitarian class environment that actively included all learners, regardless of ability or disability and aligned with the philosophy and intent of IDEA.

Key to the success of the HEARTS model was the opportunity for student-teachers to continually debrief, reflect upon, and adjust their teaching practices in order to meet the diverse needs of their students. Increasingly as HEARTS progressed, student-teachers honed class activities and assignments to facilitate peer interaction, thereby creating a community environment. In collaborating with one another for ideas, student-teachers developed strategies for specific assignments and students<sup>2</sup> so that each could actively participate in art-making to the fullest extent possible according to his or her needs.

## Conclusions

Turnbull (1991), in describing his communitarian philosophy, warns that education that emphasizes "individualistic utilitarianism," focusing on individual self rather than responsibility toward others, poses particular problems for those experiencing disabilities. Under such a paradigm, the best form of equality that students experiencing disabilities can hope for is concession on the part of educators and peers for their special educational needs without acknowledgement of their ability to contribute. This level of equality is hardly aligned with the intent and philosophy of IDEA. The HEARTS model, which focuses upon interdependence of (art class) community members, demonstrates the potential of the communitarian philosophy of equality to promote a class environment that is empowering, enabling, and involves all stakeholders in contributing to the education process. Communitarian equality allows individuals to recognize and celebrate the contributions of all participants in the art class environment, a recognition that, hopefully, will extend beyond the art class to the community art large.

## Notes

1. I utilize Doug Blandy's wording "individuals experiencing disabilities" in that this approach "assumes that a disability is not an inherent condition of people but is a condition experienced under certain circumstances as a result of human-made environments" (p. 131).
2. For each session of HEARTS, we rotated head and assisting teachers, as well as student participants, in order to allow all student-teachers opportuni-

ty to work within a different class dynamic with students experiencing varied combinations of needs. All student-teachers had opportunity to work as head teacher and as an assisting teacher and to work with each of the HEARTS student participants.

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Michelle Kraft is an Associate Professor of Art Education at Lubbock Christian University. She may be reached at [michelle.kraft@lcu.edu](mailto:michelle.kraft@lcu.edu).