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NECESSITATING CIVICS EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Teachers are charged with preparing students to participate as active members of their community. Civic education in schools ensures students an enhanced quality of life where they have a voice when planning their lives rather than following preplanned outcomes. This conceptual analysis explores the critical needs for civics education for students with intellectual disabilities, who often face barriers to full participation in civic life, including the vital role of civics education in developing civic competence and promoting inclusive participation in democratic societies. This article emphasizes that fostering civic knowledge, appreciation of difference, tolerance, respect, and personal efficacy among all individuals, regardless of ability is fundamental in building equitable and participatory communities. By promoting inclusive civic education, educators empower individuals with intellectual disabilities to engage meaningfully in decision-making processes and contribute to the social and political fabric of society. Finally, this article addresses the connections between teacher dispositions, curriculum and pedagogy to promote effective civic education among students with intellectual disabilities.

Keywords: *Intellectual disability, civic education, teacher disposition*

INTRODUCTION

Schooling has a role in preparing democratic citizens (Taylor, 2020). Thus, civics education is an important part of students' education. Through civics education, students learn what it means to be a citizen of their country. Teachers of civics are charged with preparing students "with the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to become informed and engaged citizens" (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Therefore, civics education should be made available to all students, including students with intellectual disabilities.

In the United States, according to Federal Law, in the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), all children must be educated in the least restrictive environment. While the law does not explicitly state inclusion, the past 20 years have seen a paradigm shift with the regular educational

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setting being the norm rather than the exception for children with disabilities and special education needs. IDEA has contributed to an increase in children with intellectual disabilities accessing the general education curriculum (Bauer & Shea, 2003) and a limited increase in students with intellectual disabilities receiving services among their typically developing peers (Wehmeyer et al., 2021). While access to the regular education curriculum has received a lot of attention for academic needs, limited focus has been placed on civics education for children with intellectual disabilities. Essential to the changing role of the general education teacher is their disposition. Meeting the need to place highly qualified teachers in diverse education should go beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills, in order to address the disposition.

The conceptual analysis in this article explores the critical needs for civics education for students with intellectual disabilities, including the vital role of civics education in developing civic competence and promoting inclusive participation in democratic societies. Particularly, a central focus is placed on ensuring that civic education is accessible to all learners, including individuals with intellectual disabilities, who often face barriers to full participation in civic life. The present article uses conceptual analysis ideas for “the clarification and mapping of the meanings of ordinary concepts” (Gatley, 2023).

Intellectual Disabilities and Civic Education

The Individual with Disabilities Education Act uses the term “intellectual disability” in referring to cognitive disabilities. It defines an intellectual disability as a “significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period that adversely affects a child's educational performance”. This definition indicates that not only do these individuals perform at the bottom two percent level, but they also have significant difficulties with adaptive behaviors which include performing independent skills with socialization, communication, and the practical daily living necessary for day-to-day functioning (Purugganan, 2018; Vakil et al., 2010). Taylor (2020) emphasizes that “democratic citizenship aims are frequently conceptualized according to an unevaluated assumption that civic preparation requires a particular level and display of intellectual ability”. As a result, these students were deemed unable to participate as citizens, making their own decisions in both private and public matters (Bueso, 2022). However, for individuals with intellectual disabilities, participation in society as citizens is shifting from one of being marginalized and disenfranchised to inclusionary. Shifts in language in federal laws, such as the 2018 Perkins V, reinforce the need to understand and value the accompanying rights and responsibilities for all citizens, including those with intellectual disabilities, in its use of the term special populations to specifically name individuals with disabilities or who are disadvantaged.

Civics includes the study of how people participate in governing society. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) defines social studies as: “the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence” (NCSS, 2010). Fundamental to civic competence is the ability to participate in civic and democratic processes individually and collaboratively. Among the desirable competencies developed by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools are civic dispositions which include but are not limited to (1) Appreciation of difference, (2) Tolerance and respect and (3) Personal efficacy (Baumann, 2015). In its simplest

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form for individuals with intellectual disabilities, civic education is being a responsible member of a democratic society. Civics education also empowers students with ID with the ability to advocate for self by teaching them to be autonomous (make choices, set personal goals), problem solve and regulate their own actions (Salend, 2008).

Teacher Dispositions

Including students with intellectual disabilities in a civics classroom requires teachers' dispositions focused on diversity, equity and inclusion. On June 25, 2021, President Joe Biden signed an executive order which specifically defines equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Within that order, the following definitions are found:

(a) The term "equity" means the consistent and systematic fair, just, and impartial treatment of all individuals, including individuals who belong to underserved communities that have been denied such treatment.
(b) The term "inclusion" means the recognition, appreciation, and use of the talents and skills of employees of all backgrounds.
(c) The term "accessibility" means the design, construction, development, and maintenance of facilities, information and communication technology, programs, and services so that all people, including people with disabilities, can fully and independently use them. Accessibility includes the provision of accommodations and modifications to ensure equal access to employment and participation in activities for people with disabilities, the reduction or elimination of physical and attitudinal barriers to equitable opportunities, a commitment to ensuring that people with disabilities can independently access every outward-facing and internal activity or electronic space, and the pursuit of best practices such as universal design.

Successful inclusion requires the above to be considered when working with students, in particular students with intellectual disabilities. This is further reinforced by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, which identifies fairness and belief that all students can learn amongst their definitions of professional dispositions. To engage in positive inclusive practices, teachers must have the ability to appreciate differences through a lens of tolerance and respect.

Appreciation of Differences

Inclusion goes beyond just the physical placement of a student with disabilities in the regular education setting to emphasizing the need to engage students with disabilities that offer unique learning opportunities not available in segregated settings (Anderson et al., 2022). According to Friend (2008), inclusion is actually a belief system shared by all members of a learning community. Specifically, it is the belief that all members of the learning community have a responsibility to educate all students so that they reach their maximum potential. This concept shifts the focus from the teaching of academic content alone to including the dispositions necessary to provide a sense of community and belonging to individuals with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, successful

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inclusion necessitates an equity lens where differences are appreciated in a fair, just, and impartial manner (Biden, 2021).

In education settings, an appreciation of differences is reflected in the concept of equity and fairness. According to the NCSS, while there does not exist a standard definition of 'civic learning', it requires teachers to reflect on the thoughts and experiences of their students. Therefore, civic readiness is distinct from their lived experience, personal ideas, current needs, and future goals they bring to the classroom. This concept of equity and fairness also applies to individuals with disabilities, where differences are recognized, and they are provided educational opportunities that match instruction to their learning style and needs. It provides individuals with intellectual disabilities the fundamental right to quality education (Cartledge et al., 2009; Welton & Vakil, 2009).

Tolerance and Respect

According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, tolerance is "willingness to accept behavior and beliefs that are different from your own, although you might not agree with or approve of them." Respect is "admiration felt or shown for someone or something that you believe has good ideas or qualities." To the definition of respect, Encyclopedia.com adds: "due regard for the feelings, wishes or rights of others." The power of words cannot be ignored as language used to describe individuals with disabilities influences our perceptions of disabilities (National Education Association, 2025). The 1990 passage of IDEA formally introduced to the legislature "people first" language. This should be reflected in how teachers perceive and interact with individuals with disabilities. At the center of tolerance and respect are communications based on trust which develops with consistency and flexibility rather than consequences and punishment (Allen & Cowdery, 2014). Trust includes giving individuals with disabilities choices, calling out bullying and teasing, and interacting with individuals with disabilities and their families during the teaming process (Grant & Ray, 2010; Wright et al., 2007). Trust and respect should be restructured to include diverse perspectives rather than be dictated by the dominant culture, which often determines the context in which these values are viewed (Harry, 2008). When approaching instruction with an appreciation of differences founded in tolerance and respect, inclusion becomes a positive practice in enhancing civic education for all students.

Implications for Curriculum and Pedagogy

Within the school setting, the optimum form of service is holistic, addressing the needs of the entire individual. Civic education in schools ensures students an enhanced quality of life where they have a voice when planning their lives rather than following preplanned outcomes. It includes providing them with meaningful socially valid outcomes with a repertoire of skills that have utility and meaning in their life.

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Differentiated Instruction

Capturing the appropriate dispositions expected in any setting can be difficult to define and operationalize. Differentiated instruction is one useful strategy that responds to student diversity by providing on a learning continuum where pace, level, or kind of instruction is adjusted to capitalize on learner strengths and interests (Lawrence-Brown, 2020). Teachers who differentiate instruction are cognizant of the ways in which they need to change their instruction to address the dispositions above in various forms. These include activating prior knowledge and experiences, readiness, language, culture, learning preferences, and interests which students with intellectual disabilities bring to the classroom (Lawrence-Brown, 2020).

Unfortunately, teachers often do not infuse differentiated instruction in the curriculum and are unaware of how to best reach diverse learners, especially individuals with intellectual disabilities. The inability to recognize the background, disabilities and abilities, student readiness, learning profiles and interests creates a cross-cultural dissonance which is further exacerbated by inappropriate behavior and ineffective instruction resulting in fewer positive outcomes (Kim & Morningstar, 2005). The reduction or elimination of physical and attitudinal barriers to equitable opportunities requires a commitment by teachers to ensure that students with disabilities can independently access instructional activities, including those that utilize technology. This requires teachers to utilize instructional best practices including the use of Universal Design of Instruction (Biden, 2021). To this end, strategies should include an understanding of the relevance of intellectual differences and respecting the valued systems of support operating within the communities of the individuals.

Personal Efficacy

Originally developed by Albert Bandura, personal efficacy reflects the confidence an individual has in their ability to complete a task or achieve a goal. Personal efficacy is linked to outcome expectancy and whether we believe we will be successful (Garrin, 2014). For individuals with intellectual disabilities, personal efficacy begins with self-determination.

Self-determination is defined as a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed and self-regulated autonomous behavior. It is the interaction between the individual and society to complete a task or achieve a goal (Ward, 2006), and refers to a coordinated, result oriented set of activities focusing on improving the academic and functional achievement for individuals with intellectual disabilities.

An understanding of one's strengths and limitations, together with a belief of oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults in our society (Field et al., 1998).

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While historically, society believed that individuals with disabilities were unable to make decisions or have input into their life choices. Work by Wehmeyer (2015) revealed significantly higher positive outcomes for those individuals with intellectual disabilities who were self-determined when compared to those who were not identified as self-determined. This effect observed across multiple behavioral indicators of autonomy and perception of control suggests that self-determination training and planning enhances individuals with intellectual disabilities ability to be autonomous and have control of their lives, enabling them to make changes which impact them individually and society collectively (Carter et al., 2011). They demonstrate increased positive outcomes, tend to be more assertive, independent, have better job opportunities and are more active citizens in society (Rowe et al., 2014; Ward, 2006).

Person Centered Planning

Person Centered Planning is a systematic approach where individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families define their participation in school and society (Sorrells et al., 2004; Wells, 2012). Fundamental to the successful personal efficacy is a re-examination of teachers' perspectives on the abilities of individuals with intellectual disabilities to make informed choices. Personal efficacy gives individuals with intellectual disabilities the right to self-determination and allows them to have input and participate in their decision making with respect to their future.

This includes attending Individual Education Program meetings, especially if transition services which involve planning for independent living after graduation are being discussed. It is the ability of individuals with intellectual disabilities to advocate for themselves with the skills necessary to understand their abilities, strengths and challenges.

The focus has shifted for the intervention specialist from an advisor and planner to a consultant, which empowers individuals with intellectual disabilities to be responsible for their own decisions. Teachers need to collaborate with various supports including informal supports in the community to create opportunities and set goals. Collaboration with community providers improves opportunities for successful transition to career pathways (Dawson et al., 2020). Additionally, teachers need to recognize the home as a valuable resource and provide authentic community-based experiences for instruction. This allows for successful integration into the community (Shogren & Turnbull, 2006).

Collaboration and Transition Planning

Collaboration between families/caregivers and educators cannot be ignored. It is with families/caregivers as equal partners that the team can shape the morale and personality of the individual with disabilities (Waluyandi et al., 2020). Collaboration is the interaction of a team of individuals, practitioners, families and community to better plan and meet the needs of their students (Friend & Bursuck, 2002). It necessitates the sharing of resources, skills, and various perspectives of all participants to enhance integration and participation in society to bring about social change (Kiely, 2005). Within the school setting, the optimum form of collaborative services

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for individuals with intellectual disabilities must address the needs of the entire child. Collaboration between the individual, general and special educators, related professionals, families, and informal support in the community should be an ongoing process, where all parties share their expertise to promote the success of the individuals (Carter et al., 2011). They should work closely to develop a continuum of services which promote self-determination and effective integration into the community (Dawson et al., 2020). Strategies to enhance partnerships between all parties to expand the range of services provided must include a multidisciplinary approach, which includes facilitating access to services which are authentic and community based. This includes the provision of accommodations and modifications to ensure equal access to employment and participation in activities for individuals with disabilities (Biden, 2021). The necessity of collaboration is most clearly illustrated when transition teams work together to support individuals with intellectual disabilities to plan for continued civic education throughout their adult life.

Civic education necessitates a community of members who share commonalities and a commitment to one another. They share certain conventions and values which contribute to the group's sense of well-being (Martens & Gainous, 2013; Rosenberg et al., 2011). For individuals with intellectual disabilities, it is imperative that for civic education to be promoted, the rights of the individual must be appreciated and respected in the context of the community (Banks, 2017). However, despite the legal mandate and current literature supporting collaboration through community-based experiences at the high school level, many individuals with cognitive disabilities are not well prepared to effectively integrate into their communities as transition plans do not include community-based experiences (Schutz et al., 2021). Community integration requires maximum use of both the formal and informal support systems available within the community to promote the participation of individuals with intellectual disabilities. While transition plans often avail the use of formal support such as medical and mental agencies and social services, collaborative attention must be paid to the meaningful informal support systems unique to the individual and community (Ford et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Including students with intellectual disabilities in civics education is not merely an act of compliance with inclusion mandates but a moral and democratic imperative. True civic participation demands that all individuals, regardless of intellectual ability, are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to act as contributing members of society. Yet, despite legislative advances such as IDEA and Perkins V, civic education for students with intellectual disabilities remains largely marginalized in curriculum design and teacher preparation. This reflects an enduring assumption that civic competence requires a certain level of cognitive ability, a belief that continues to exclude rather than empower (Taylor, 2020).

A critical analysis reveals that the barriers to inclusion are not rooted in students' capacities but in systemic and attitudinal limitations within educational structures. Teachers' dispositions toward equity, diversity, and inclusion are therefore central to transforming civic education into a genuinely participatory experience. Moving beyond tokenistic inclusion requires educators to

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engage critically with ableist assumptions, design differentiated learning experiences and employ pedagogical practices that honor self-determination and personal efficacy. Civic education must extend beyond the acquisition of knowledge to the cultivation of agency, where students with intellectual disabilities see themselves as decision-makers and advocates within their communities.

To achieve this vision, policy and practice must converge. Schools should adopt civic curricula that embed principles of Universal Design for Learning, community-based participation, and person-centered planning. Teacher preparation programs should integrate coursework and field experiences that explicitly link civic education with inclusive pedagogies. Moreover, assessment of civic learning should reflect diverse forms of participation, recognizing advocacy, collaboration, and community engagement as valid indicators of civic competence.

Ultimately, fostering civic education for students with intellectual disabilities is about more than inclusion—it is about transforming the concept of citizenship itself. When education systems embrace all learners as civic actors, democracy becomes not only more representative but more just. Inclusive civic education thus redefines belonging, ensuring that individuals with intellectual disabilities are not passive recipients of policy but active shapers of the democratic future.

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