Promoting Inclusion through Democratic Education: Strategies and Implications

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Abstract

This article aims to explore various strategies that could be used to promote inclusion through a democratic education system. It was prepared based on a number of literature sources concerning inclusion and the democratic process. The reviewed literature was sourced from libraries and various search engines. The collected information was then systematically organized into eight themes reflecting strategies required to promote inclusion through the democratic process. Different approaches, such as ensuring equal access to education for all children including those with special needs, creating a welcoming environment for all, providing multiple ways of learning to accommodate diverse learning styles of learners, promoting inclusion in the classroom, and optimizing participation of learners in decision-making processes, can be practiced to enhance the inclusion through the democratic education process. Furthermore, respecting individual rights, fostering collaborative learning environments, and promoting transparency and accountability in educational practices could also be useful in maximizing inclusion through the democratic process.

Keywords: Promotion, inclusion, democracy, education, collaboration

Introduction

Inclusive education has passed a number of phases to come into the current stage (Villa & Thousand, 2016). Several paradigms shifts such as normalization, segregation, mainstreaming, special education, and integrated education contribute inclusive education to come into this condition (Ryndak & Alper, 2003). During this journey, different philosophies and theories contribute to building inclusive education. Inclusion and democratic education have reciprocal relationship. Democratic education produces good and responsible citizens, who respect others, actively participate in social affairs, and involve in informed decision-making (Biesta, 2013). Democracy, particularly in education, fosters inclusion by integrating diverse

perspectives and voices (Sant, 2019). Democratic education and inclusion play complementary role for the advancement of each other. As societies become more democratic, there is a growing recognition of the importance of inclusion and equal participation for all members. Education plays a crucial role in fostering democratic values and practices (Starkey, 2005). Democratic education recognizes and respects multiple perspectives, it respects diverse voices, including those of marginalized groups (Percy-Smitha et al., 2019). Inclusion here means not just being present but actively participating and having one's knowledge valued. To ensure inclusion, education should foster a sense of belonging and responsibility among all individuals, irrespective of their backgrounds or identities.

The relationship between democracy and inclusion can be understood in the context of addressing diversity and pluralism either in or outside the educational institutions. Inclusive educational practices in general seem to have their roots in democratic ideas. In classrooms that promote democratic values among all children despite their socio-cultural and economic background (Karageorgou, 2022). Democratic education aligns with inclusive pedagogical differentiation by respecting diversity. Democratic classrooms uphold values of inclusivity, cooperation, and participatory decision-making, promoting active citizenship and equity (Sanahuja et al., 2020). Democratic education aims for holistic individual growth, fostering proficiency in communal living. Recognizing the interdependence among individuals, effective education instills virtues essential for harmonious coexistence and efficient collaboration that can be condusive for inclusion (Subba, 2014). In democracy, inclusion is conceived as a fundamental principle aimed at ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their background or identity markers, have equal opportunities to participate in society (Bagga-Gupta, 2007).

Democratic education respects everyone and making a commitment to provide equal access of each student to the resources available in the community. The qualities like tolerance, acceptance, a wider view, global awareness, reflection and equal justice rests within the teachers to shape the child in all possible ways to face this competitive world of today (Subba, 2014). Empathy, understanding, and appreciation for others can be inculcated within students by incorporating diverse perspectives into education to create more inclusive society (Biesta, 2013) in the future. Democratic education acknowledges diversity, respects individual voices, fosters inter-cultural skills within students to create an inclusive culture within

educational institutions in particular and an inclusive society in general (Falvey & Givne, 2005). Consequently, all learners including those with special learning needs can get sufficient benefits from democratic education since it attempts to institutionalize inclusivity in all sectors of society.

Democratic education is an educational philosophy and approach that applies the principles of inclusiveness in the learning process. It is based on the belief that students should have a voice in their education and be actively involved in decision-making processes within the school community. In a democratic society, people are given the power to make a variety of meaningful choices pertaining to their daily lives. 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. If democracy means empowering people to make meaningful decisions, then democracy in education should result in a similar empowerment of young people (Erwin & Kipness, 1997). Democratic education empowers learners to make decisions about the well-being of self and others. These values are promoting inclusion in classroom. Democratic classrooms can be characterized as those where frequent opportunities are provided for children including those with special learning needs to decide what, where, when, and with whom they want to play, work, learn, and spend leisure time. Democratic education therefore plays an imperative role to maximize inclusion of all people by following principles of equality, access to resources, collaborative working culture, and the like.

Democratic education is a set of beliefs, which provides an educational approach that seeks to institutionalize equal and equitable opportunities for all students including girls, children with disabilities, and children from marginalized and disadvantaged backgrounds. Educational institutions play an imperative role for socializing individuals towards democratic values and principles. Schools are places where democratic ideals such as equality, freedom, justice, inclusion, etc. are instilled in individuals. The necessary skills for fostering democratic culture do not develop automatically in children. Teaching democracy means preparing children to become citizens who will preserve and shape democracy in the future. Therefore democracy should be a key aspect in every form of education at the earliest age possible (Subba, 2014). Fostering inclusion within these institutions, therefore, is directly related to the broader democratic goals of promoting equality, diversity, and participation (Bagga-

Gupta, 2007). Likewise, inclusive education aims to create a learning environment where students come from diverse background can learn together in the same classrooms and schools by receiving a continuum of supports (Villa & Thousands, 2016) ranges from universal tier to intensive tier especially in multi-tiered support system.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this article is to explore that approaches to promoting inclusion through democratic education. To achieve this objective, a wide range of literature was consulted and organized them by generating different themes.

Methodology

This article was prepared by reviewing a wide range of literature using a descriptive research design to identify approaches to fostering inclusion through the democratic education system. A total of 18 pieces of literature (two from 1997 to 2004, seven from 2005 to 2014, and nine from 2015 to 2024) related to inclusion and democratic education were reviewed. The reviewed literature was sourced from libraries and various search engines such as https://www.pdfdrive.com/, https://www.libgen.is/, and https://scholar.google.com/. The collected information was then systematically organized by generating eight themes representing strategies for fostering inclusion through the democratic education process. Only the literature dealing with inclusion, democracy, and democratic education was chosen for review. Most of the consulted literature was written in an international context, and the findings were applicable to institutionalizing inclusion through democratic education in Nepal. The consulted literature was properly cited in the text, and detailed information for each literature source is provided in the reference section.

Results and Discussions

Nepal is an independent, indivisible, sovereign, secular, inclusive, democratic, socialism-oriented, federal democratic republican state (Nepal Law Commission, 2015). The Nepalese classroom reflects a spectrum of individual differences and diversity. Inclusive education, rooted in the principles of human rights, emphasizes the right of every individual to education without discrimination. Creating an inclusive educational environment is crucial for the formation and development of future teachers and tutors. One central component of democratic education is hands-on, experiential learning. Students engage in learning by doing, exploring, and experiencing real-world phenomena which helps increase inclusion of all students in

education. This approach facilitates the development of practical skills and a deeper understanding of concepts (Erwin & Kipness, 1997). A democratic education system prioritizes principles of democracy, equality, inclusivity, and participation for example, within the educational context. Educational institutions contribute to democratic process by ensuring equal opportunities and participation for all individuals through recognition and acknowledgements of their diverse identities and needs (Bagga-Gupta, 2007). Some ways that could be applied to promote inclusion through democratic education are given below:

Ensuring equal access: Democratic education ensures equal access of all children to education regardless of their individual background, socioeconomic status, or any other characteristics (Arnesena & Lundahlb, 2006). Access is taken as a prerequisite of inclusion. Inadequate access to power may demolish inclusion and influence in democratic processes. When certain groups hold dominance in democratic structures, it creates inequalities and undermines democratic principles of equality and inclusion (Percy-Smitha et al. 2019). Inclusion therefore can be maximized by ensuring that diverse groups in society have equal opportunities and access to resources. Efforts should be made to address inequalities and inequities of society to uplift the condition of marginalized people through democratic processes to promote their inclusion (Biesta, 2013). Optimizing access of underprivileged, disadvantaged, and marginalized groups to cultural, social, economical, and political activities helps increase their participation first and then inclusion.

Creating welcoming environment: Education not only teaches about democracy but also provides experiences of living democratically. Inclusive education, where diverse perspectives are respected and valued, mirrors the principles of democracy (Starkey, 2005) in one hand. On the other hand, democratic education system welcomes, respects, and acknowledges all people irrespective of their caste, gender, religion, linguistic background, and the like. Welcoming environment either in or outside educational institutions plays an important role in maximizing inclusion in all sectors of society.

Providing alternative ways of learning: Democratic education provides different approaches to learning based on what works best for them. In this kind of system, students are encouraged to get involved in their learning. They take part in discussions, projects, and teamwork that help them think critically, be creative, and solve problems (Erwin & Kipness, 1997). Some students might need special help

because of their special learning needs. In this regard, democratic education believes that everyone should have a chance to speak up and be part of things. Such provision of democratic education system also helps in inclusion of students come from diverse backgrounds.

Promoting inclusion in classroom: Democratic value promotes inclusion in classroom. This includes creating a conducive, supportive and respectful learning environment to eliminate bias and discrimination, and to promote sympathy and empathy among students (Biesta, 2013). Democratic value reflects the optimizing 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 persons including those with disabilities. Therefore we cannot imagine an inclusive society without democratic value. It means, democratic education values diversity and promotes inclusivity by recognizing and respecting the unique backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of all students to ensure their inclusion in different strata of society including educational institution.

Optimizing participation of learners: Democratic education encourages active participation of all stakeholders including students, parents, teachers, and the broader community, in decision-making processes related to education (Biesta, 2013). Inclusion in decision-making processes is fundamental for democratic culture (Percy-Smitha et al., 2019). All students including those with disabilities, therefore, should be provided ample opportunities to engage in group discussion, continuous conversation, and decision making process to develop critical thinking skills within them. On the other hand, teaching staff should be equipped with basic knowledge and methods for working with children who have special educational needs (Stepanova, et al. 2020). The recognition of people's participation in knowledge production process is essential for fostering inclusive democracies (Percy-Smitha et al., 2019). In a democratic education setting, students are encouraged to actively engage in their learning journey. They participate in discussions, debates, projects, and collaborative activities that enhance critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills. In an ideal democratic community, all citizens have equal rights and opportunities to participate in decision-making processes (Zilla, 2022). These values of equality and participation promote inclusion both in classrooms and society.

Respecting individual rights: Democratic governance gives learners an opportunity of putting democracy and respect for human rights into practice (Noula et al., 2014)

through democratic education process. It also promotes meaningful and sustainable participation of all learners at all levels of education for inclusive society through democratic citizenship. Democratic education respects the rights and autonomy of individuals including those with special learning needs. It highlights the rights and responsibilities of each citizen that helps strengthen inclusion (Biesta, 2013). Understanding diverse cultures and beliefs, promoting tolerance, care, and respect for others also helps mitigate exclusionary practices in different strata of society. Constitution of Nepal has enshrined rights of different people (Nepal Law Commission, 2015); children, women, persons with disabilities for examples. When these rights are respected through democratic education then their rights can be protected that ultimately maximize inclusion in different sectors. Democratic education foster mass education and provide education for all.

Collaborative learning: Democratic education emphasizes collaborative learning environments where all students including those with disabilities work together, learn from each other, and actively engage in dialogue and discussion (Villa & Thousands, 2016). By promoting dialogue, collaboration, and shared decision-making, democratic schooling nurtures a sense of belonging and social responsibility (Starkey, 2005). Inclusion is the key stone of today's education which applies to accommodate/include all human beings (Pandit & Mishra, 2016). Collaboration between schools, families, communities, and policymakers helps promote inclusion through democratic process. They can identify and address barriers to inclusion, advocate for social justice, and create opportunities for meaningful participation for all individuals (Biesta, 2013) including those with diabilities. Inclusion begins with recognizing that all children and their families have the right to access high quality services for quality education. Such inclusion can be ensured by institutionalizing democratic culture.

Transparency and accountability: Democratic education believes in transparency in decision-making processes and makes accountable to the broader community for the quality and outcomes of education that finally strengthen inclusivity. Furthermore, democratic education seeks to empower individuals, fosters a sense of community and belongingness, and prepares students to become active and responsible citizens in a democratic society who respect diversity and inclusiveness.

Thus, inclusive education and democratic values adopts the social model of disability by focusing on removing barriers within the educational system that may prevent the full participation of students with disabilities. Education for democracy, in

democracy, and through democracy contributes to creating a more inclusive and equitable society (Starkey, 2005). It emphasizes creating inclusive practices and environments that accommodate diverse needs. Rights-based approach to education has been developed in the field of inclusive education as a result of the various theories and principles. Human rights-based education is an education system that ensures a quality education for every child regardless of their diversity and differences.

Implications

Nepal is culturally, linguistically, politically, socio-economically, and geographically diversified country where more than 140 ethnic groups speak 124 languages (National Statistics Office, 2023). Democratic education plays crucial role in ensuring equal access of all children to education disregarding their individual profile and characteristic. Diverse perspectives are respected and valued under democratic education system. This creates a welcoming environment that promotes inclusion both within educational institutions and in broader society. In addition democratic education provides a continuum of approaches to learning that suit to all learners come from various backgrounds. Both learners with and without special learning needs learn together and additional supports to the students with special needs are provided on a required basis. Democratic values also promote inclusion in the classroom by creating a supportive and respectful learning environment that eliminates bias and discrimination rooted for long time in Nepali society. Likewise, democratic education system provides active participation of all stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, and the broader community, in decision-making processes to develop 'we feeling' and 'sense of belongingness' within them to ensure their inclusion in education first and in broader society later. Moreover, democratic education emphasizes collaborative learning environments where all students work together, learn from each other, and actively engage in dialogue and discussion. Collaboration between schools, families, communities, and policymakers helps promote inclusion through democratic processes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, democratic education is both a vision and a practice guided by principles of equity, social justice, acceptance, inclusiveness, and human rights. It aims to create a supportive learning environment that respects diversity, fosters a sense of belongingness, and provides equal opportunities to all students including

those with special learning needs. Democratic education plays a crucial role in promoting inclusive principles by cultivating critical thinking skills and preparing students to be active and informed citizens in a democratic society. This involves teaching students to critically analyze information, engage in civic participation, and advocate for social justice and equity. Moreover, democratic values provide frameworks for integrating inclusive principles into broader contexts especially into both inside and outside the classroom. Democratic education empowers students, promotes active citizenship, and instills values of social responsibility and equality. It underscores the belief that education should not only impart knowledge and skills but also nurtures democratic values and a commitment to justice and equality in society.

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